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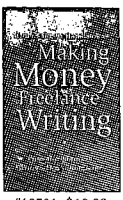

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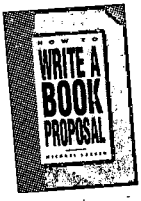

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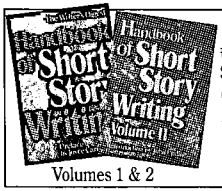

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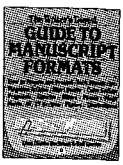

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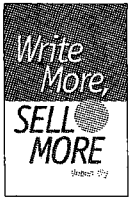

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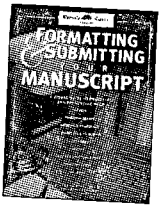

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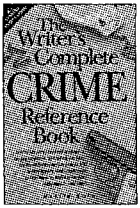

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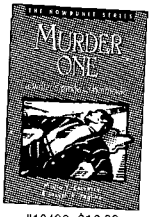

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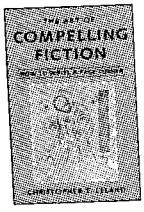

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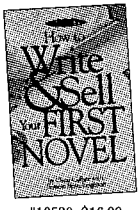

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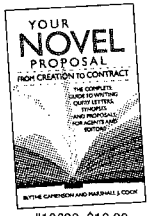

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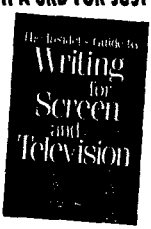

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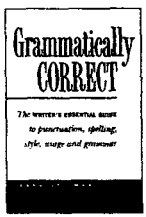

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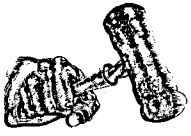

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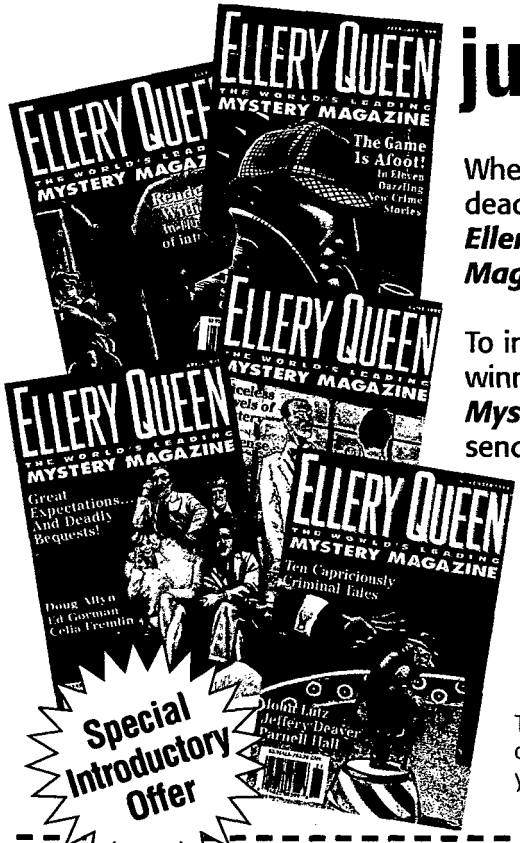

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THE CURE

by David Handler

"Hi, it's me . . . Don't say a word. Just tell me yes or no—are you still in bed?"

Julian Embry, a trimly built, meticulous man of fifty-two with thinning, mouse-colored hair and a resting pulse rate of 108, had just settled into his usual seat on the 7:42 train to Grand Central when the cell-phone junkie in the seat behind him started in like he did every morning.

"You are? What are you wearing? . . . Rita, you are killing me here. I'm not going to be able to think about anything else all day."

This man, whose name was Barry Ackerman, was no taller than five feet six and no older than thirty. He had a goatee, great bunches of fitness-center muscles, and a seemingly endless collection of Armani suits. Barry Ackerman had invaded Julian's life about three months earlier. Always, he waited for the same train at the Willoughby station as Julian. Always, he sat right near Julian, reeking of cologne and self-importance. Always, he called his mistress just as soon as he got settled. Always, he was loud. Very, very loud.

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"Rita, I have got to go. I'll be there at five. You KNOW I'll be there . . ."

Next came the unending stream of business calls. Julian wasn't exactly sure what Barry Ackerman did for a living. He was some variety of dot-com entrepreneur involved in web-hosting centers, B-to-B service providers and other revolutionary forms of instant communication that were of even less interest to Julian than what, if anything, Rita was wearing.

"Hi, it's me. My train gets in at eight thirty-six. Will you tell Marcie I've got a truly tasty broadband idea I want to talk over with her? Great. . . . Hi, it's me. Are we still on for lunch? Great. I'll call you. . . . Hi, it's me . . ."

All Julian knew was that Barry Ackerman was ruining his life.

Julian was a polite, soft-spoken man who placed a great deal of emphasis on precision and order. Every weekday morning for the past sixteen years he had caught this same 7:42 train. *His* train. He parked in the same parking space. *His* space. He sat in the same seat. *His* seat. He would take off his jacket, fold it neatly, and place it in the rack overhead. He would open his briefcase and pull out his work and four needle-sharp No. 2 pencils. Then, for the next fifty-six minutes, Julian Embry would focus all of his intense powers of concentration on the pages before him. For Julian, his morning commute was precious work time, the one private interlude in his day when there were no interruptions, no distractions, and—above all—no phone calls.

But lately, all of that had changed.

"Hi, it's me . . . Would you get me everything you can on Dynelectron? Great. . . . Hi, it's me . . ."

First, Julian had tried moving to a different car on the same train. But since the 7:42 originated out in Fairfield, the only seats that were still empty by the time it got to Willoughby were in the first car. *His* car. Next Julian had tried taking the 7:28, but it was a local that actually ended up lurching in sixteen minutes later than the 7:42. He'd even considered driving thirty minutes in the wrong direction to Fairfield and catching the train there, but that would mean he would have to leave the house an hour earlier every day and get home an hour later. Plus, his monthly commute would cost him an extra forty dollars.

Former journalist and critic David Handler won widespread acclaim for his autobiographical first novel, *Kiddo*, then went on to win an Edgar and an American Mystery Award for his series starring Stewart Hoag—a hero who combines "the panache of James Bond, the in-your-face attitude of Sean Penn, and the lethal wit of Gore Vidal," according to the *Detroit Free Press*. His latest novel is *The Golden Section* (St. Martin's). †

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"Hi, it's Barry Ackerman. Would you have Lew call me just as soon as possible? The toilet in one of our guest bedrooms is stopped up and it needs fixing right away. Thank you very, very much."

Julian could not believe it. This man was so windy and self-important that he actually thought everyone else in the car wanted to hear him talk to a plumber about his toilet. If Julian had been a different sort of person, a confrontational loudmouth who had been raised by the same set of boors who'd raised Barry Ackerman, he would have spun right around in his seat and told the smug little bastard to either shut up or risk being hurled bodily from the moving train.

But Julian had not been brought up that way. He was brought up to be civil. Therefore he stewed, his heart racing faster and faster as he tried to concentrate on his work.

After he got out of Princeton, Julian had spent three years as a fact-checker at *The New Yorker,* where he'd dreamt of being the next J. D. Salinger and he'd met Sylvia. Their twin boys, Jason and Jeremy, were now at Princeton themselves. Sylvia's inheritance was bankrolling it. She ended up as a school librarian in Westport. He ended up at Seagrove Press, first as a copy editor, then as an editor. For the past fourteen years he had been a senior editor.

Along the way, he'd published one slim collection of literate, moody short stories, *The Song of the Piping Plover,* which was politely reviewed and sold 1,648 copies.

While his own personal reading taste ran more toward the elegantly crafted short fiction of O'Hara and Cheever, Julian's strength as an editor was fine-tuning complex, nail-biting thrillers. When it came to plotting, Julian was a dogged and demanding master surgeon who believed that a properly constructed plot possessed all of the inner beauty and precision of a fine Swiss watch. Above all, it should work. Whenever one of Seagrove's authors turned in a manuscript that didn't, and no one in the house could figure out why, they passed it to Julian. There was no editor in all of publishing better than Julian Embry at the fine and increasingly rare art of diagnosing where a plot had jumped its tracks and how to coax it back onto them. Through the years, he had rescued dozens of brand-name writers. So prized were his skills that authors who had moved on to lucrative deals with other houses still sought his input.

"Hi, it's me. Honey, I forgot to take my blue suit to the cleaner's . . . Will you? Thanks. Yeah, yeah, I called Lew about it. He hasn't gotten back to me yet. I'll let you know . . ."

Right now, Julian was trying to shepherd along *Skid,* a first novel about a pilot of commercial jumbo jets who is also a multinational serial killer. Seagrove had paid 2.5 million dollars for it on the strength of a great first chapter and a sexy heroine who

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had Julia Roberts written all over her. The author was a San Francisco criminal defense attorney with blond hair down to her butt who had the top literary agent in New York, Libby Gotbaum, and three film studios panting for a first look. She had everything but the book. Her first draft, in Julian's opinion, was nothing more than three hundred pages of warmed-over farina sporadically livened with kinky sex, brutal violence, and gaping lapses in logic and credibility. An amateurish mess, in other words.

In Julian's most private moments, such as when he lay awake at two in the morning with his heart racing and Sylvia fast asleep beside him, he wished he could come up with just such a can't-miss, seven-figure thriller idea—for himself to write. He was a professional. He knew craft—every trick there was going all the way back to John Buchan and Sax Rohmer. He should be the one to make the fortune, not some telegenic amateur. And then he'd never have to ride the 7:42 with Barry Ackerman again. He could stay home and work on another collection of his literate, moody short stories. Possibly edit a select few authors on a freelance basis if he felt like it. The trouble was, Julian had never come up with a can't-miss commercial idea in his life. Not ever. His mind just didn't work that way. If only it did. If only life was fair. If only . . .

Now Barry Ackerman's cell phone was ringing. Once, twice, three times. Why the devil didn't he answer it? He was sitting right there.

"Hello? . . . Oh hi, Lew. I don't know, it's just like totally plugged up . . . Yeah, yeah, I tried a plunger . . . Today is impossible? Are you sure? . . . Yeah, I guess noon tomorrow will have to do. No, wait, Darla won't be around. She helps out over at the Shoreline soup kitchen on Thursdays."

From this man's lips even charity work sounded boastful. Julian could feel his face beginning to flush. He was now totally unable to concentrate on his manuscript. All he could think about was diving over the seat and strangling Barry Ackerman with his bare hands.

"Yeah, she's there from ten until three. How about after three? . . . No way, we can't wait until the weekend. You know what, Lew? Tomorrow's not a problem. I'll just leave the kitchen door open for you. Yeah, yeah, I'll turn the system off. Yeah, yeah, I promise. You remember where we are, right? Good, good. You're the best, Lew . . ."

Incredibly, none of Julian's fellow passengers seemed bothered by Barry Ackerman. No one rolled their eyes. No one shot dirty looks at him. It was only Julian who was bugged by this self-important, philandering little loudmouth. For Julian, it was as if his whole world had shrunk to this car and there was only enough room on board for one of them. This could not continue. One of them, to put it simply, would have to go.

Julian knew he was letting Barry Ackerman bother him more than he should. But this was how he felt. As the train began to

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slow to a stop at 125th Street, he wondered if he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

The offices of Seagrove Press had been situated a short walk from Grand Central on Fifth Avenue until earlier that year, when Seagrove's parent conglomerate merged with another, larger, conglomerate. Now Julian had to take the shuttle over to Times Square, where Seagrove shared sparkling new high-rise office space with several other hardcover publishers, two mass-market paperback empires, a record label, a cable channel, and a stable of monthly magazines. It wasn't the additional shuttle trip Julian minded so much as it was the presence of the MTV studio next door. This meant that every morning he had to fight his way through a mob of screaming teenage girls who had cut school and were lined up in the street in hopes of getting on *Total Request Live.*

He arrived before his secretary and discovered he had an urgent message on his voice mail from Roger Parkman, the twenty-eight-year-old British wunderkind who was the latest in a long line of editorial chiefs under whom Julian had served. The conglomerate had recently promoted Roger to the top slot at Seagrove after a year of seasoning in Hollywood, where he had distinguished himself as a cutting-edge visionary in the new world order of multimedia synergy.

Roger wanted to see him as soon as he got in.

Julian found him in his corner office, slouched at his desk with his morning tea and a stack of sales printouts. Mr. Jones was dozing on the sofa next to a stack of manuscripts. "I got a wake-up call from Libby Gotbaum this morning, Julian," he said glumly. "She didn't stop screaming at me for twenty minutes. Do you have any idea what it's like to be screamed at by Libby Gotbaum for twenty minutes?"

"I can guess. Last night she screamed at me for ten."

Roger sat back in his chair, sighing. He was a lanky young man with a huge Adam's apple, an unruly mop of reddish hair, and a silver nose stud. His concave chest and Buddy Holly eyeglasses gave him the aura of a cyber-geek, but he was always fashionably turned out in black designer suits and matching black silk shirts—even though it meant he was invariably covered with cat hair. Roger insisted on lugging his cat, Mr. Jones, to work with him every day. Anyone who came into Roger's office was expected not only to make a huge fuss over Mr. Jones, an utterly unremarkable tabby with no discernible personality, but also to overlook the odor that emanated from the overflowing litter box on the floor behind Roger's desk. The building's cleaning staff refused to go near it, and Roger himself did not seem to notice the smell.

"Libby is not fun when she is riled, Julian. Root canal with a

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complete absence of Novocain is more fun. What exactly did you *do* to her?"

"She wanted to know how I was making out with *Skid.*"

"And . . . ?"

"The book still needs a lot of work," Julian informed him. "Her author keeps changing the rules as she goes along. She flashes backward and forward, switches points of view, verb tenses, voices. She gets herself so bollixed up that her villain ends up killing two different people on two different continents at virtually the same time. There's no way any of it can happen. And no way the reader can follow it."

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?" Roger said offhandedly. "It *is* a thriller."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Julian said, frowning at Roger.

"I mean there *are* no rules. One's goal is simply to keep the reader off-balance."

"But it has to be credible and real. Otherwise the reader is being cheated."

"You see, I don't agree. When it comes to a thriller, there is no such thing as cheating. You're living in the past, Julian. We're not going up against le Carré anymore. Our competition now is WWF Smackdown and Nintendo. I've been out there in our brave new world, Julian. I've drunk the Kool-Aid. And believe me, what our readers want is thrilling moments. *Spielberg* moments." Roger jumped to his feet and began to pace around the office, bursting with the cocky certainty of a privileged youth who had his parents' world by the tail and knew it and loved it. Julian himself had never been so certain of anything, or so young. "I did not buy this book because I thought it was well written or ever *would* be well written," Roger went on, lecturing him now. "I bought it because it has a truly great aerial chase scene between two jumbo jets. That's fantastic stuff. That's what readers want. Give them a half-dozen scenes like that and you've got a break-out winner. And to hell with the connective tissue. Most of them don't even bother to read it anymore. They just race right on by, same as they surf by the commercials on the telly."

Mr. Jones stirred now and padded over toward the window and jumped up onto the sill, where a number of plants grew in pots.

Roger watched his cat for a moment, a beneficent smile on his face, before he turned back to Julian. "Readers want to have fun. They *like* to have fun. I'm not entirely sure you understand that, Julian. The concept of fun, I mean."

Julian stood there in silence, not quite sure how to respond.

Roger broke it with a boyish whoop of laughter. "God, listen to me. I sound like the worst sort of armchair shrink. Please forget I said that, will you? Because this isn't personal. We simply have a

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great deal of money tied up in this author."

"I do realize that. That's why I'm—"

"I'm taking you off of this book, Julian," Roger cut in brusquely. "I'm giving it to Glynis."

Julian drew in his breath, staggered. For the very first time it hit him—he had no future at Seagrove or anywhere else in publishing. Everything he knew and cared about was obsolete. *He* was obsolete, an old-time nuts-and-bolts repairman with grease-stained hands in a new age in which everything, including literature, was merely something to be used up and thrown away like a piece of Kleenex.

Briefly, Julian Embry felt as if he might pass out and have to be taken downstairs on a stretcher.

"Glynis does cookbooks, Roger," he finally managed to get out hoarsely. "She's never done a thriller. I'm not even sure she's read one."

"I know that," Roger said easily. "But she'll take the author to good restaurants and stroke her and make her purr. Besides, it isn't about *this* book. It's about Libby Gotbaum. She has the top client list in New York. If she decides we're the sort who'll make her authors jump through flaming hoops then she'll take them somewhere else. And then where will we be? Out of business, that's where. You're a highly competent editor, Julian, but you have a mid-list mentality. If a book is well reviewed and it earns a nice little profit, then you're satisfied. I'm not. My mission, and I *have* chosen to accept it, is to eliminate our mid-list entirely. We need fewer books and bigger books. Nothing but big books."

A steady chewing noise began to compete with him from over by the window. Mr. Jones was busy gnawing on a plant and swallowing it. Soon, he would gaack it back up.

"Mr. Jones, what *are* you doing?" Roger exclaimed brightly. "Tell me, Julian, isn't that the cutest cat you've ever seen?"

"You're absolutely right, Roger. I have never seen a cuter cat."

"Have you taken a vacation lately?"

Now Julian was seated in Dr. Theodore Goldman's small, paneled private office on the ground floor of a doorman building on Park Avenue, his clothing and his dignity restored. Julian had made the appointment a week earlier out of concern for his rapid heartbeat and how it kept waking him in the night. Sylvia knew nothing about any of this.

"We went abroad in April," he replied. "A week in London, another in Tuscany."

"And how was that?"

"Stimulating. Fattening. Wonderful. Why?"

Dr. Goldman had given him an electrocardiogram and stress test, both of which showed that Julian's heart was healthy. He'd

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also extracted an array of Julian's bodily fluids and subjected him to that special examination procedure which is reserved for suspected international drug mules and perfectly law-abiding men over the age of forty.

"Julian, I think what you've got is a mild case of anxiety. I'm going to give you a prescription for Valium. Take it if you need it. Don't take it if you don't." He handed the prescription slip across the desk to Julian, then sat back with his hands folded across his ample tummy. Theodore Goldman had been Julian's doctor for almost thirty years. He was an old-school physician who liked to chat and liked to listen. Julian, for his part, enjoyed their talks. Teddy Goldman was one of the only people he came in contact with anymore who was older than he was. "Has something been bothering you lately? Money?"

"Not really, no."

"How are things at home? You aren't having an affair, are you?"

"No, no. God, no. I just . . ." Julian trailed off, struggling for the words.

"Don't hold back, Julian," Dr. Goldman urged him. "Tell me what's on your mind. Otherwise, I can't help you."

"I was brought up to live in a different world, that's all," he began slowly. "A world where people valued civility and integrity, where they cared about quality. All anyone cares about anymore is grabbing what they can for themselves, right now, and to hell with everyone else."

"The world is changing. And not for the better."

"Well, it's getting to me. People . . . cocksure kids, loudmouthed jerks with cell phones . . . they bother me more than they ought to."

"Bother you how?"

"They make me angry. And that scares me. Because there's only one world. And there's only one me. And I . . ." Julian broke off, running a hand through his hair. "Should I go see a shrink or something?"

"Possibly," Dr. Goldman conceded. "But before we go down that road, may I suggest a different cure? Because I know exactly how you feel. I was there myself once. And this worked for me."

Julian leaned forward anxiously. "What is it?"

"Confront your fear."

"Confront it how?"

"Have you ever gone scuba diving?"

Julian stared at him with his mouth open. "Scuba diving? No, I haven't."

"I did. And let me tell you something—a tremendous fear hits you when you're twenty feet underwater, Julian. All of that water pressure is bearing down on you. And the only thing keeping you alive is the oxygen in that tank on your back. Unless you relax,

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breathe slowly and evenly, you're never going to make it. But you *can* make it. You *do* make it. And when you do, a tremendous calm comes over you. Because you've proven to yourself that you still have control over your own emotions and your own body. Go scuba diving, Julian. Go white-water rafting. Go rock climbing. Show yourself that you've still got what it takes. That you're still standing on your own two feet. We all need to do that when we reach a certain age. *Your* age. Am I making any sense?"

Julian Embry smiled at him. "A great deal of sense. In fact, I think I feel better already."

Julian spent forty-five minutes the following morning cutting up old magazines in his den.

Sylvia had already left for the library by then. He told her he had picked up a flu bug and would be working at home that day. She told him to make sure he drank plenty of fluids.

Home was a snug, weathered, four-bedroom cape on Johnny Cake Hill Road, a winding country lane lined with mature, leafy oaks. Most of the houses on Johnny Cake had been built in the fifties. It was a transitional street by Willoughby standards, a street for folks on their way up, folks on their way down, or, in the case of the Embrys, folks who were not going anywhere at all.

Julian had not said a word to Sylvia about being unceremoniously yanked off of *Skid* by Roger. Or about his appointment with Dr. Goldman. They had spent a quiet evening at home watching a tape of an old Falcon movie starring George Sanders, an actor whom they both liked.

At 9:30 A.M., he climbed into the green workman's coveralls he'd bought when he was redoing the attic insulation. Then he grabbed his toolbox from out of the garage and hopped into the twins' truck. Before they went away to Princeton Julian had gone in with them on a three-year-old Toyota Tacoma with four-wheel drive. When they were home, it was theirs for toodling around. When they weren't, Julian used it for hauling brush to the dump and negotiating the trip to the Willoughby train station in bad weather.

Julian headed over to West Avenue and around Willoughby's historic town green, with its gazebo and benches and war memorials. The steepled white Congregational church overlooked the green, which had been voted Connecticut's prettiest many times. Willoughby was mostly a commuter town now. But it retained its original small-town flavor thanks largely to its green. Julian turned onto Water Street, which skirted along Long Island Sound past the yacht club and boatyards and eventually intersected with Georgetown Avenue. Georgetown took Julian past the high school and the country club. It was a warm, sticky May morning. The sky was the color of dirty dishwater. Julian found himself sweating profusely in

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his coveralls. Still, he needed them. Just as he needed a new map to find Powderhorn Hill Road. It was a brand new cul-de-sac in a brand new development on the edge of a forest. A herd of deer, eight in all, stood there in the middle of the street in broad daylight. They would not move. He had to inch his way around them.

The house he was searching for, number 50, was one of those gargantuan trophy chateaus that were popping up, shoulder to shoulder, on tiny lots all over town.

He parked the pickup in the driveway and got out. If any of the neighbors noticed him, they would pay him no mind. He was a workman in overalls carrying a toolbox. Around back, he found a sparkling blue swimming pool, a cabana, an apron of manicured lawn. There was a patio with teak furniture and a built-in gas grilling island with a wet bar and refrigerator.

The back porch was well shielded from the neighbors by trees. No one could see him here. He put on the pair of disposable white latex gloves he'd bought at the hardware store so he'd leave no fingerprints behind. He took a deep breath and tried the door. Unlocked. He opened it. No alarms went off. He went inside and closed the door behind him, setting down his toolbox.

Now it was official: Julian Embry, a man who had never once gotten a speeding ticket or lied on his income-tax return or raised his voice in public, was already guilty of illegal entry, trespassing, and God knows what else. He could go to jail if he messed up. This realization made Julian's mouth go dry, but his breathing was slow and steady.

I can do this. I have still got what it takes.

The kitchen was airy and vast, with a center island topped with slate-gray granite. Copper pots hung from a rack overhead. There was a commercial range with two ovens, a Subzero refrigerator, an antique farmhouse table and chairs. There was silence, so much silence that Julian's ears rang.

There was a dining room with a chandelier and upholstered walls. The living room was as large as Julian's entire home. In there, he found a grand piano topped with photos in silver frames. Mostly, the pictures were of Barry . . . *Hi, it's me* . . . Barry aboard a yacht, grinning. Barry in front of the Eiffel Tower, grinning. There was only one picture of Mrs. Barry, Darla, who had big, bleached hair and big, bleached teeth. There were no pictures of kids or pets. It was just the two of them in this great big designer show house.

One entire wall of the living room was lined with glass-fronted bookcases. Rows and rows of hardcover books. Books on politics, on history, on philosophy. Julian flipped through random volumes with an expert's eye. The bindings were unbroken. Not one of these books had ever been cracked. They were décor, nothing more.

Standing there in the Ackermans' living room, Julian suddenly

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felt exhilarated. He hadn't experienced such a rush of pure, sinful elation since those nights when he was ten years old and he'd camped out in a tent in the backyard, reading the Hardy Boys deep into the night by flashlight and munching on Hershey Bars with almonds. He and Sylvia had never gone camping together. In fact, camping out was something Julian hadn't so much as thought about in twenty years. Why was he thinking about it now?

He roamed. There was a game room with a pool table and video-arcade games. There was a soundproofed music room with electric guitars, amplifiers, and a full set of drums. A gym outfitted with gleaming chrome exercise equipment and a sauna. An entertainment room with a giant television, stereo, and a collection of videos as huge as one would find in a neighborhood Blockbuster. Julian marveled at all of the Ackermans' toys. Never in his life had he owned such toys.

Now he went upstairs, humming an old Les McCann tune, "Compared to What," under his breath. The master-bedroom suite featured a sitting room with a fireplace. Barry and Darla had their own personal dressing rooms. Barry owned at least two dozen Armani suits and over twenty pairs of Ferragamo loafers. Julian moseyed down the hall toward the guest rooms. There were four of them, each with its own bath. In one of these he found a note taped to the toilet tank: *"Lew, please be careful not to stain the carpet."*

Julian heard a car door close out front. Instantly on alert, he dashed over to a front window and glanced outside. Just a neighbor across the street. Letting out a sigh of relief, he glanced at his watch. Nearly eleven. Quickly, he went back down to the kitchen and returned to the master bedroom carrying a long, sharp Wusthof carving knife. He turned back the bedspread and removed the note from his pocket, the one he had made out of headlines from old magazines. Julian laid it flat on one of the bed pillows, gazing at it with satisfaction. The note read:

BARRY—STAY AWAY FROM RITA OR NEXT TIME THIS WILL BE YOU!

Now Julian raised the knife over his head and with a swift, vicious downward movement of his right arm plunged it through the note and deep into the pillow, unleashing a small cloud of goose feathers.

His mission accomplished, Julian returned downstairs, retrieved his toolbox, and went back outside the way he had come in, leaving the kitchen door unlocked. He removed the latex gloves, pocketed them, and climbed back in the truck, pausing to gaze at himself in the rearview mirror.

He looked the same, but he did not feel the same. Dr. Goldman had been right—not that Julian had ever doubted him.

Now Julian started up the truck, backed out of the Ackermans' driveway, and went shopping.

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There was no sign of Barry Ackerman on the 7:42 to Grand Central the next morning.

All was quiet in Julian's car. Blissfully so. And Julian could not stop smiling. He had fought back and he had triumphed. Won back his train. Won back his dignity. Won back his life—and he had the resting pulse rate to prove it. In fact, he had even more than that.

He had a can't-miss idea. . . .

A middle-aged, suburban accountant has just lost his buttoned-down shirt on the NASDAQ. The bank is about to seize his house. His marriage is crumbling. One morning on the train he overhears the hotshot Wall Street operator seated behind him tell a plumber that he'll be leaving his house unlocked so the guy can fix his toilet. Desperate, the accountant lets himself in and robs the guy. While he's there, he discovers a briefcase under the bed with ten million dollars in it. It turns out the operator is actually a money launderer for the Russian mafia. Which the accountant doesn't know. All he knows is that by the time he gets home that night, with the briefcase, his own house has been ransacked and his wife kidnapped. The operator has tumbled to him and he wants his money back or else. What HE doesn't know is that the accountant doesn't particularly want his wife back . . .

As Julian rode into the city in rich, luxuriant silence, he began to scribble notes, writing as fast as he could.

What if the operator's beautiful wife walks in on the accountant while he's robbing the place? She demands to know who he is. "I'm Rita's husband," he explains. "Your husband and my wife are having an affair." In response, she actually wants to help him rip off her husband.

It was all beginning to spread out before Julian, a smorgasbord of choices, each one more exciting than the next. All he had to do was write it. He'd stick it out as long as he could at Seagrove. Meanwhile, he'd channel his time and energy into this.

A big book of his own.

He could do this. He had the talent and the knowledge. What's more, he had the nerve.

I am still standing on my own two feet.

When he was done, he would place it with a good agent, make 2.5 million dollars, and he would never, ever have to stand in Roger Parkman's office smelling his cat's poop again.

Now Julian dug down into his briefcase and pulled out the new toy he had bought for himself yesterday. He used it to call Sylvia, who didn't leave for the library until nine.

"Hi, it's me . . . No, I'm on the train . . . Never mind how. Don't say a word. Just tell me yes or no—how would you like to camp out in the backyard tonight?" ●

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The Theft of the Bathroom Scale

by Edward D. Hoch

"You must understand my position, Mr. Velvet," Reynolds Johnston was saying when Nick began to lose interest. "I have a client who must be protected. Arnie recommended you, said you were the perfect man for the job."

Arnie was Gloria's brother. Nick and Gloria occasionally went to his restaurant in Greenwich Village, and it wasn't the first time he'd recommended Nick to a customer. This time, though, the prospective client was a high-powered attorney with a Wall Street law firm. Nick had reason to mistrust lawyers. Most of those he'd known had been powerful men with few, if any, scruples.

Edward D. Hoch recently won the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Private Eye Writers of America at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. There is an irony to this for *EQMM*, for with 443 of his stories published in our pages, we have yet to bring into print a single Hoch P.I. story. Mr. Hoch assures us he will write one for us soon. Meantime, here's a new Nick Velvet. ‡

Sitting in the man's oak-paneled office a block from the New York Stock Exchange, Nick said, "Let me get this straight, Mr. Johnston. You want to hire me—"

"Technically, my client wants to hire you."

"Your nameless client."

"Yes."

"He or she wants to hire me to steal a bathroom scale from a home on a ranch in Texas?"

Johnston smiled. "That's correct. Arnie tells me that stealing valueless objects is a specialty of yours."

"I do it from time to time," Nick admitted.

"The Matcheck spread isn't as large as the King ranch, of course, but they do have twenty thousand acres. Harvey Matcheck

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inherited the place two years ago following the death of his uncle. He lives there with his wife Beth, an occasional fashion model."

"No children?"

The attorney shook his head. "Only a few servants and the ranch hands. The scale must be taken early next week, while Beth Matcheck is away from the place. She's doing some modeling work in Hollywood but she'll be flying back late Wednesday morning. That's your deadline, and the scale must be taken in the early morning, before breakfast. Harvey Matcheck is a man of exact scheduling. He rises each morning at six-thirty, showers, dresses, and goes down to breakfast at seven. You'll have only the time after he showers and dresses but before he has breakfast."

"You know I charge fifty thousand dollars."

"Arnie said—"

"Cost of living increase," Nick told him bluntly. He didn't particularly care whether he got the assignment or not. "Half now and half when I deliver the scale."

Reynolds Johnston sighed and nodded. "All right. We have an agreement." He passed a paper across the desk. "Here's a sketch of the house's interior that my client supplied. The scale is in this second-floor bathroom just off the master bedroom."

"That'll help."

Johnston seemed to be hesitating. "It's a great deal of money."

"Then hire someone else. It's a simple enough job. I imagine you could find someone along the border who'd do it for a thousand dollars."

"I'd do just that if it weren't for the animals."

Nick's ears perked up. "What animals?"

"The Matcheck Ranch is a wild animal preserve. They open it to hunters several times a year. It's all quite legal. There are several such places in Texas."

"And the animals roam free at night?"

"Some of them do, yes."

"What sort of animals are we talking about?"

"Bengal tigers. There are only about five thousand left in the entire world, and some say there are more of them in Texas than in India."

In his younger days, Nick Velvet had once stolen a rare tiger from a zoo, but he wasn't about to tangle with them at his age. "You can't do it, Nicky," Gloria agreed. "I'll tell my brother to stop suggesting you for jobs like this."

"It's not Arnie's fault. I'm sure he didn't know the job involved stealing a bathroom scale before breakfast from a ranch house surrounded by tigers."

"Before breakfast? You didn't mention that before."

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"I have no idea why it has to be done then."

"Maybe you could get Sandra Paris to help you."

He shook his head. "I work alone."

"But that's her specialty, Impossible Things Before Breakfast. And you haven't always worked alone. There are plenty of times when you've hired people to help you."

It had been nearly a year since he'd last encountered Sandra Paris, known as the White Queen, a thief even more audacious than himself. That last time, in Reno, their paths had converged in a most unlikely manner. It wasn't the first time they'd helped each other out of a tight spot, and the more he thought about it the more he was forced to agree with Gloria. Maybe Sandra Paris could help him.

She'd told him once how to reach her, at an e-mail address that was an anagram of her name. He tried it now on Gloria's computer and he had a reply within an hour. *Nick, March is a dreary month and I'm game for anything that will get me out of New York. Let's meet for lunch tomorrow noon at the Brasserie on 53rd.*

The following day, Saturday, at noon, she strode down the steps of the restaurant wearing a white leather coat over white jeans and matching boots. Her platinum-blond hair framed a pale, attractive face that turned more than a few heads. "You don't believe in traveling incognito, do you?" he said with a smile, rising to greet her.

"It's good to see you, Nick. It's been far too long since Reno." She slipped out of her coat and draped it over the back of her chair. "I thought Gloria might come, too."

"She volunteers at a homeless shelter twice a week. Says she does it for my sins." He motioned to a waiter to take their drink order. "What'll you have?"

Sandra shook her head. "Not while we're talking business." They ordered lunch and then she said, "Tell me about this job."

Nick quickly outlined everything Reynolds Johnston had told him. "There was something about the man that turned me off from the start, even before he mentioned the tigers."

"He gave no hint as to why someone would want a bathroom scale stolen, and why it had to be before breakfast?"

"My clients rarely tell me much of anything. But when Gloria heard it had to be before breakfast, she thought of you right away."

"Smart woman. How much money are we talking about?"

Though they'd kept their voices low, Nick remained silent as the waiter approached with their lunch order. When he'd gone, Nick said, "I told him my fee was fifty thousand."

"And if I help you with the tigers?"

"You get half."

"Fair enough. What about security guards?"

"No one special, but the cowhands are all armed and they look

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after the animals twenty-four hours a day."

"In the house?"

"Just Harvey Matcheck and a few servants, from what I understand. His wife is away until Wednesday noon."

"Interesting that this week was picked for the robbery. Why did she have to be away?"

Nick Velvet sighed. "You ask too many questions, Sandra, and I don't know the answers."

"Is this some sort of recording scale that keeps a record of Matcheck's weight? Is it one of those deals where he'll be paid his weight in diamonds on a certain date?"

"I'm told the scale is a cheap variety selling for under ten dollars in most drugstores. It's not even digital. You stand on the metal top and a wheel turns round to your correct weight, showing it through a little window."

Sandra put her mind to work. "Something could be hidden in it, but why would it have to be stolen before breakfast? Are you replacing it with another scale that's going to blow up or something?"

"Where do you get these ideas? There's no replacement. We place the scale carefully into a box Johnston has provided and we're out of there. That part I can handle alone. You can wait outside with the tigers."

A slow smile spread across her face. "When do we go?"

"We fly to Austin Monday morning, separately. I'll rent a car and meet you. The ranch is about an hour's drive from the city. We'll grab a few hours' sleep and be out there well before daylight to have a look around. That too early for you?"

"I'm used to it," she assured him.

Nick's flight landed at Muller Airport in Austin shortly after noon. He rented a car and drove to a motel about halfway between the airport and the ranch. Sandra was on the next flight from New York and rang him from the airport. They dined together in his room so they wouldn't be seen in the motel's restaurant. Then, when they'd completed plans for the following morning, she returned to her own room on another floor. He put in a call to Gloria to tell her all was going well.

It was four A.M. and a chilly fifty degrees when they left the motel, driving west toward the Matcheck Ranch. This was only a dry run to see what the ranch looked like at daybreak. The actual robbery would take place the following morning. "Ever been to Texas before?" Sandra asked as Nick drove.

"Stole a leather coffin once, down near the Mexican border. I wouldn't do it today. It would be too valuable."

Her laughter was pleasant in the darkened car. "You'll steal anything, won't you?"

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"Anything of little or no value. I get paid well, and there's little risk of a prison sentence even if I'm caught."

"They locked you up once. I had to get you out."

"And I appreciate it, Sandra, believe me."

She lit a cigarette, though he knew she rarely smoked. "We could be a team."

Nick shook his head. "I mostly work alone. This one is special because I'm getting too old for tigers. Did you bring the tranquilizer guns?"

"Yes, and some other supplies, in my backpack."

"Like what?"

"Night-vision goggles. And epinephrine. People who are allergic to bee stings carry it."

"Is that a problem with you?"

"It has the effect of slowing bleeding. If one of us gets clawed by a tiger out there tomorrow we don't want to bleed to death before we can get help."

"You think of everything, Sandra."

"That's why I'm still alive." She tossed the cigarette out the window. "Know anything about this Harvey Matcheck?"

"Just that he inherited the ranch from his uncle two years ago and his wife's away this week."

"I did some checking. He was a prisoner of war in Vietnam back in the early seventies. They held him three years. By the time he returned, his parents were both dead and his uncle took him in."

"What about the wife?"

"A former model, still does occasional fashion shoots. Probably married him for the family money."

They parked on a dirt road that ran along the fenced-in perimeter of the Matcheck Ranch, not far from a locked gate which bore a sign that glistened in their headlights: *Matcheck Ranch & Wild Animal Preserve—Private Hunting by Appointment.* By Nick's watch it was 5:30, about an hour before sunrise. They walked for a bit, peering through the darkness, but there was no sign of wildlife. "We have to get inside," he said. "Looking at a twelve-foot-high fence doesn't tell us a thing."

"We can't go in there today, Nick. If we cause an incident they'll be doubly alert tomorrow. You've got the sketch map. That's all we need."

As the sun rose in the eastern sky, Nick scanned the horizon with powerful binoculars. The house that was their target was nowhere in sight, miles off beyond a rise. At first he saw no sign of life at all, but presently a couple of horsemen appeared at the top of the rise. A red pickup truck honked as it drove slowly down a small road near the riders, apparently headed for the gate, and the horsemen waved.

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"I don't know," Nick admitted. "I'm not sure. But Johnston wanted the scale stolen after Matcheck showered and went down to breakfast."

"Then that's what he'll get," Sandra agreed.

They were up before dawn the following morning, and at the Matcheck gate just after five-thirty. It opened silently at Sandra's electronic command, and Nick drove a few miles along the road, until the mansion and guesthouses came into view. "Of course he'd have guesthouses for the hunters," Nick said, "but we're interested in the main house."

Sandra studied her copy of the floor plan. "I'll be under the bathroom window waiting for you to drop the cord. Are you going in now?"

He nodded. "Once it's daylight the ranch hands will be up and about. I'll hide till after he showers."

"What about alarms?"

"Simple ones can be bypassed easily enough. With those tigers prowling around, I'm betting Matcheck wouldn't feel the need for anything more elaborate. I don't think the tigers are likely to roam free this close to the house, but keep your tranquilizer gun ready."

There was nothing at all on the front door except a fancy lock Nick opened in under two minutes. Then, following his memory of the floor plan, he made his way upstairs to the master bedroom. It was almost daylight now, and the cloudy sky was growing brighter each moment. He could hear Harvey Matcheck snoring on the other side of the closed door, still ten minutes away from his wake-up time. The bathroom had a door from the hallway and another directly from the master bedroom. Nick used the hallway door and by the light from the window he saw the scale. It was just the right size to fit the box he'd brought with him. He opened the window and peered down. Sandra was below him, hiding behind a flowering bush that hardly seemed native to Texas.

That was when the clock radio in the bedroom suddenly turned on, seven minutes early. Matcheck's schedule wasn't quite as precise as he'd been led to believe. Nick quickly placed the box in a large wastebasket, hoping it would go unnoticed, then stepped back into the hall, closing the door soundlessly behind him. Almost at once he heard Matcheck enter through the other door. The toilet flushed, the sink water ran, and he held his breath, hoping no one else was up this early. After a few minutes he heard the shower running, just as the sound of footsteps on the stairs reached him. Someone was coming down from the third floor, perhaps a cook or someone else to prepare breakfast.

Nick carefully opened the bathroom door and stepped into the steamy interior. He could see Harvey Matcheck's silhouette

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against the shower curtain and hear him humming to himself. Suddenly the water was turned off and Nick stepped back into the hall, relieved that it was now empty. He froze there, waiting, for ten more minutes, until he heard the sound of the bedroom door opening. Then he slipped back into the bathroom. Through the partly opened door he watched Matcheck going down the stairs, a tall slender man wearing a western shirt and designer jeans. He probably looked good astride a horse.

Nick carefully slid the scale into the waiting box. He tied one end of the cord around it and lowered it out the window to Sandra. She would meet him back at the car. When he saw the box in her hands he breathed a sigh of relief. The rest would be easy.

"Who are you?" a woman asked behind him. He turned to confront a Mexican maid, standing in the bedroom doorway with clean towels and a mop. He tried to smile and say something, but the high-pitched scream was already out of her mouth.

"And who might you be?" Harvey Matcheck asked, looking up from his bacon and eggs. The maid's scream had brought two muscular ranch hands running, and Nick had made no attempt to escape. Matcheck's weathered face betrayed only a slight annoyance at having his breakfast interrupted.

"Velvet. Nick Velvet. I've been hired by the Connor family to find his killer."

"A private detective?"

"In a sense."

He continued eating his breakfast. "I didn't know Wayne had any family."

"A sister in Utah. They weren't close, but the news of his death upset her."

"So twenty-four hours later you're prowling around my house at seven in the morning?"

"The door was open. I came in looking for someone."

"Where's your car?"

"Down the road a bit." He hoped that information wouldn't endanger Sandra.

Matcheck motioned to the two men. "Search him to see if he's armed. Then you can leave us."

"I'm not armed," Nick assured him, but the men searched anyhow.

"Sit down," Matcheck told him when they were alone. "Help yourself to coffee."

"Thanks."

"Now what's this about Wayne? What makes you think we know anything about the killing?"

"His sister says he always liked the ladies," Nick said, building

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on a remark Nancy had made at the Emporium. "She thinks one of them might have killed him."

"Not likely. It was probably a robbery gone sour. Maybe Wayne caught a car thief in the act."

Nick didn't like that scenario. It brought suspicion back to Sandra Paris. She might have stabbed Wayne Connor in a moment of panic, but Nick didn't think she'd have lied about it. Not to him, at least. "His sister was pretty certain a woman was involved."

"Siblings should learn to mind their own business," Matcheck stated with a sour expression. "I have a half-brother, Walt, who's been trying to get this place away from me ever since my uncle died. He comes here twice a year for the hunting and I can see it in his eyes." That reminded him of something. "How'd you get by the tigers? They prowl around at night."

"I didn't see any. If I'd known they were on the loose I would have called for an appointment."

"You should have done that anyway, Mr. Velvet. Finding you here like this, one could mistake you for a common thief."

"I assure you I am not one of those."

Matcheck's eyes hardened as his finished the last of his coffee. "Whatever you are, get out. Don't let me find you on my property again."

"If you really think I'm a thief, you're a brave man to be sitting here alone talking to me."

Matcheck rose to his feet, and for the first time Nick saw the pistol and gunbelt around his waist. "Not so brave, Mr. Velvet, only prepared. I wear this for the tigers."

When Nick returned to the rental car, Sandra was nowhere in sight. His first thought was that she'd been discovered and brought in for questioning, but after a moment he heard her call his name softly. "Where are you?" he asked, unable to see her anywhere.

"Under the car. I just wanted to make sure it was you." She slid out and brushed off her shirt and jeans. "There was no good hiding place here and I couldn't just sit in the car. A couple of horsemen rode by already, looking for tigers. They must bring them in every morning to feed them."

"Where's the scale?"

"Attached to the bottom with magnets. I figured that even if they found me it would be safe. We can move it inside now, in case we hit any bumps that might jar it loose."

"Let's pick up our things at the motel and head for the Austin airport."

"I don't like these winds. I think it's going to storm."

By the time they reached the motel, thunder was rumbling in the distance. It was a bit after nine and their flight back to New

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York was scheduled to depart at noon. "Maybe I should phone the airport," Nick decided, "to make sure it's on time."

He called the unlisted number of the airline club and heard the bad news from a sympathetic young woman. "The weather bureau has just issued a tornado watch for the next four hours, while these violent thunderstorms are in the area. Your New York flight is on its way from L.A. but we'll have to divert it elsewhere unless the weather clears. If you call back in an hour I may know more."

"Thank you," Nick said, then told Sandra, "we might as well wait here and call back in an hour." But at ten-fifteen they learned the bad news. Their plane, due in just after eleven, had been diverted to San Antonio along with all others scheduled to arrive at that time. As a result, the noon flight to New York had been canceled. They were rebooked on a later flight, around four that afternoon.

"It's not too bad," Sandra decided.

"What'll we do now?"

She smiled. "Get some breakfast. We've done our impossible thing for the day."

They checked out of the room just after twelve and were loading their suitcases in the trunk when a Texas Rangers patrol car pulled into the lot. "You folks got some identification?" one of the rangers asked, getting out of the car. A few drops of rain had started to fall, though the thunder was still off in the distance.

"What's this all about?" Nick asked, showing his driver's license.

"Were you at the Matcheck ranch earlier this morning?"

"Briefly, yes."

"Mr. Matcheck asked us to find you and bring you back out there. It seems something of his is missing."

"All right," Nick said. "We'll go along and get this straightened out."

They started to enter their car but the ranger motioned toward the patrol car. "Into the backseat. I'll follow in your car."

Nick and Sandra found themselves together in the caged-in backseat of the rangers' patrol car. "This is like a cell," she whispered.

"Exactly. Harvey Matcheck must throw a lot of weight in these parts if he can get people picked up like this."

They returned to the ranch once more, and this time the trooper phoned ahead for the gate to be opened. Nick's rented car followed along. Harvey Matcheck was waiting for them at the front door of the big house. "Hello again, Mr. Velvet. I must say I underestimated you."

"And I you. Your men took down the license number of my parked car, of course, and you had the rangers check out the motel parking lots." He motioned toward Sandra at his side. "This is Miss Paris, an associate."

"Did it take two of you to steal the scale from my bathroom? My

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maid tells me it's missing." A distant rumble of thunder could be heard.

Nick merely smiled. "Why would I want your bathroom scale?"

"That's what I want you to tell me. It seems as if you went to a great deal of trouble to take it."

A sports utility vehicle pulled up and parked behind the cars in front of the house. A striking blond woman got out and Matcheck walked over to greet her with a kiss. "You're right on time, Beth. How did the modeling go?"

"Fine. Have one of the men take my bags up, will you? What's going on here?"

"We've had a bit of a burglary. Nothing serious. I'll tell you about it later." He turned to Nick. "Let's go into the den and talk this over."

"You want us to wait?" one of the rangers asked.

"It might be a good idea."

Matcheck's den was decorated with trophy heads and a tiger-skin rug. Sandra's distaste for the décor was clear on her face as she sat down next to Nick on a zebra-skin sofa. "Now then, why did you steal my bathroom scale and what have you done with it?"

"I stole it because I was paid to do it," Nick answered frankly. There seemed no point in lying about it.

"Who paid you and why?"

"A lawyer whose name would mean nothing to you. He didn't give me his client's name nor the reason for the theft."

Matcheck studied him through half-closed eyes. Outside, the sound of thunder rumbled closer. "I could have you arrested on the spot."

Nick smiled. "For petty larceny?"

"Trespassing, breaking and entering, burglary. It all adds up. I want some names. I want to know why this was done."

Beth Matcheck, her face distraught, interrupted them. "Harvey, the maid just told me that Wayne Connor was murdered yesterday!"

"I hadn't a chance to tell you. It happened in town. They think a woman stabbed him in his truck."

Her eyes went to Sandra Paris. "This one?"

"I have no idea."

"Was it connected with the robbery you mentioned?"

"I don't know." His steely gaze returned to Nick. "Was it?"

"Not in any way," Nick assured him.

"Can you prove it?"

"I think so. At least, I believe I can tell you why someone wanted your scale stolen."

"Keep talking."

"My instructions were to steal it while your wife was away, after you showered but before breakfast. When the maid walked in just after you went down to breakfast and found me there, it suddenly

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became clear to me. She would be mopping and cleaning the bathroom and making the beds. She would clean the top of that scale. People who weigh themselves daily usually do so in the morning, before or after showering. I had to steal it after you stepped on it to get weighed, but before the maid had an opportunity to wipe it off. And while your wife was away, so there could be no possibility of her using the scale after you. The person who paid me didn't want the scale as a scale, they wanted your bare footprints from the top."

"That's crazy!" Beth Matcheck said. "What for?"

"There could be only one reason: for identification. A newborn baby's footprints are often imprinted on its birth certificate, or on the hospital records. The patterns of footprints, like fingerprints, remain the same throughout a person's lifetime. Someone wanted to know if you were really you, Mr. Matcheck."

"Who could that be?" he asked.

"I think I can make a good guess. It was someone who has visited here, because they knew your daily morning routine and drew me a floor plan of the house. Yet it could not have been your wife or anyone working here, because they would have ample opportunity to steal the scale without hiring me to do it. You mentioned trouble with your half-brother, Walt, who felt the ranch should be his. And I also know you were a prisoner of war in Vietnam for three years. Your parents were both dead when you returned from the war and came here to live with your uncle. I think it's safe to say that Walt's lawyer hired me to steal the scale in an attempt to prove you aren't the real Harvey Matcheck but an impostor, and therefore have no legal claim on this ranch."

Matcheck simply stared, unbelieving. "How would Walt have known that Beth would be away?"

"It was in the society columns that I had this modeling job," she reminded him. "He must have been keeping close tabs on us."

Matcheck simply shook his head. "That Walt is crazy as a loon."

"Then can I keep the scale?" Nick asked.

"What?"

"Can I keep it and earn my money? Or is there some doubt, after all, that you are you?"

Harvey Matcheck relaxed and laughed for the first time. "I'm me. Deliver the scale and collect your money. I'd like to see Walt's face when he finds out my footprints match the ones on my birth certificate!"

They were on the plane somewhere over Arkansas when Sandra Paris remarked, "You know, Nick, we never did find out who killed Wayne Connor."

"I'm a thief, not a detective. If they want sleuthing, I'll have to charge them extra."

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"But you know, I've been thinking. Johnston told you Beth Matcheck was flying home this morning from a Hollywood modeling job, but we know our plane from L.A. at that time was diverted along with all the others because of the tornado watch. She couldn't have flown in when she said. We know Connor had lots of girlfriends. Maybe the boss's wife was one of them and she found out he wasn't faithful to her. She could have flown in overnight on Monday and arranged to meet him at the Emporium yesterday morning. When she found him unconscious from my gentle tap she decided to finish the job with a knife."

"Makes sense," he admitted. "But there's nothing we can do about it."

It was some months later, during the heat of summer, that Harvey Matcheck was shot and killed by his wife in a hunting accident. The authorities didn't like her story, and two days later she was charged with manslaughter. Reading about it, Nick wondered if crazy Walt, the half-brother, might end up with the ranch after all. ●

"I do hope, Watson, that when you write up this 'Hound of the Baskervilles' business you will be good enough to exaggerate one or two details."

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Art by Ricardo Radosh

COMES THE REVOLUTION

by Gregory Fallis

Comes the Revolution, everything is jake,
Comes the Revolution, we'll be eating cake.
When the streets and rivers run with red
I'll be underneath the bed.
And after all their capers put the foe to rout
I will buy the papers to see how we came out.
Comes the revolution, all is jake
and soon we'll be eating cake.
Lyrics by Ira Gershwin

"It's the new man in the next apartment," Ida, my mother-in-law, said. "Becker." She said the name as if it left a foul taste in her mouth.

Ida Gobel isn't really my mother-in-law; Jake and I aren't actually married, although we've lived together for so long it's easy to forget. As far as that goes, Ida isn't really Jake's mother. She's his aunt—his mother's sister. Jake's parents died when he was sixteen, and Ida, who had no children of her own, took him in. Ida is

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more of a mother than a mother ought to be. If you know what I mean.

"What about Mr. Becker?" I asked. I tried not to let the weariness sound in my voice. Every month or so Ida "discovers" something horrible about somebody in her apartment building. Mr. Watkins in 10E beats his dog. The Conovers on the third floor deal drugs. Those two young women in 5B are prostitutes. Meghyn who lives up on the twelfth floor is a pagan.

Mr. Watkins, however, doesn't own a dog. The Conovers are a perfectly nice couple—she teaches economics at NYU and he works for a not-for-profit civil rights organization. The two young women in 5B are students across town at the New York Institute of Interior Design. And Meghyn up on 12 . . . well, she *is* a pagan. But, hey, this is New York City. An urban druid isn't that unusual.

A newcomer to *EQMM*, Gregory Fallis is the author of three short stories for our sister publication, *AHMM*, one novel *(Lightning in the Blood)*, and three nonfiction books dealing with crime *(Be Your Own Detective; Just the Facts, Ma'am;* and *A Murder)*. Mr. Fallis's familiarity with crime did not begin with fiction, however. He has worked as a P.I. specializing in criminal defense, and as a professor of criminology. ✝

"Becker," Ida said. She shook a finger. "Six weeks he lives here and in those six weeks what do I find? He's a militia."

"A militia?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"What's not to understand?" Ida asked. "I wasn't clear? Becker, he's a militia. Like those *meshuggeners* in Montana or Idaho, where the potatoes come from. A militia. *Feh."* She made a spitting sound.

I looked at Jake, slumped back in an overstuffed chair. He just shrugged.

I'm from Nebraska. Nebraskans aren't a shrugging people. We can perform the act of shrugging, but it doesn't convey much information. Jake comes from a culture with a rich shrugging tradition. Ida can say about thirty-seven entirely different things with a shrug. Jake doesn't have her talent, but it was still easy to interpret this shrug. It said, 'Hey, Ida may be my maternal unit, but you're on your own here.'

I tried to reason with her. "Ida, people don't form militias on the Upper West Side of Manhattan."

Ida looked over at Mrs. Klepfisch, her ever-present friend from the sixth floor, and raised an eyebrow. 'See?' she seemed to be saying. 'This is what happens when your child grows up. They bring a *shiksa* into your family and rip your heart out.' Mrs. Klepfisch shrugged.

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It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving and we were at Ida's apartment dropping off a few things she'd asked us to fetch from the market. We would spend the holiday with Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch. Just like we had for the last six years. That meant every day up to and including Thanksgiving morning we'd get phone calls from Ida . . . and sometimes from Mrs. Klepfisch . . . asking if we could pick up something from the market.

"If it's convenient," Ida will say. "If you're going out. Don't make a special trip."

And the result of all this effort will be a Thanksgiving fish. That's right. No turkey. Certainly no ham. A big poached fish. The first two years Jake and I were together, I thought it was a Jewish thing, poached fish for Thanksgiving.

"What makes you think Mr. Becker is in a militia?" I asked.

"Because I know," Ida said. "I see what he gets in the mail. Military catalogs, he gets. Who needs military catalogs? Nazis, that's who. Listen to what I'm saying to you. Becker in Seven C, he's a Nazi militia."

"What were you doing looking at Mr. Becker's mail?" I asked.

Ida sat back, shocked. "*Oy Gottenyu,* what kind of question is that?" she asked, her hand to her breast. "His mail was there, so I looked. You wouldn't look?" She gave me a cynical, knowing smile and nodded. "You'd look. And when you looked, what would you see? Nazi militia military catalogs, that's what."

"What were you doing in Mr. Becker's mailbox?" I asked.

"Mailbox?" Ida asked. "What mailbox? Who said anything about a mailbox? It was right there on that table, the one in the hallway where the lazy porter . . . he should get a pain in the *tuchus* . . . puts the packages and deliveries. You thought maybe I broke into Becker's mailbox? I'm the sort of person who'd break into a mailbox?" Ida shook her head firmly. "Nazis break into mailboxes, not Jews."

Ida gave Jake a look, the one that said, 'You see? You see who you married?'

"Ida," I said, "even if Mr. Becker *does* get military catalogs in the mail it doesn't mean he's the commandant of the Manhattan militia."

"Tell about the packages," Mrs. Klepfisch said.

Ida nodded. "Two packages he got, Becker, and guess what was on them," she said. "You'll never guess. The address from the person what mailed the package? On one it said 'Aryan,' and the other one had on it a swastika."

"A swastika?" I asked.

"A swastika," Mrs. Klepfisch said. She looked at Ida in horror. "How could she not know a swastika?"

Ida gave an expressive shrug, suggesting Mrs. Klepfisch couldn't

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even *begin* to imagine the depth of my ignorance.

"I know what a swastika is," I said.

"And a swastika is what was on this Becker's package," Ida said. "And 'Aryan.'"

"It was a modern swastika," Mrs. Klepfisch added.

"What do you mean, a 'modern' swastika?" I asked.

"They jazzed it up," Mrs. Klepfisch said. "All hotsy totsy."

Ida nodded. "So nobody would recognize them as Nazi militias," she said.

"So, was it a swastika or not?" I asked.

"It was a swastika," Ida said. "It just didn't look like one so much. You think I don't know a swastika when I see one? I know, I know."

"A swastika that didn't look like a swastika," I said. "A New Age swastika."

Ida turned to Mrs. Klepfisch. "You've seen Becker in Seven C?" she asked.

Mrs. Klepfisch nodded. "With these eyes," she said, and pointed to them so I wouldn't get confused about which pair of eyes she'd seen him with.

"Is he a militia?" Ida asked. "Or what is he?"

"He's a Nazi militia," Mrs. Klepfisch said, still nodding. "He wears those pants."

"Those pants?" I asked. I looked at Jake. He shrugged again.

"Those pants," Mrs. Klepfisch said. "The ones with all the green and the blobs on them. Militia pants, he wears."

"Fatigue pants?" Jake asked. "Camouflage fatigues?"

Mrs. Klepfisch smiled and nodded. She reached over and patted Jake on the knee. "He's so smart, your Jacob," she said to Ida.

Ida's fixation on the lives of her neighbors began about three years ago, shortly after Howie, her husband of forty-seven years, died. I blame it on a combination of loneliness and the 30-inch Sony television Ida bought a few weeks after Howie's funeral. She keeps that television on all the time. *All* the time. It goes on when she gets up in the morning and it stays on until she goes to bed at night.

"It's company," Ida says. "A little noise in the apartment is a good thing."

She even leaves the TV on when she leaves the apartment. "Who wants to come home to a quiet apartment?" she says. "And besides, the noise, it scares away the booglars. Better I should waste a little electricity than come home to an apartment full of booglars."

Burglars. Ida lives in a nice neighborhood in the West 70s, between Amsterdam and Columbus. There hasn't been a single reported burglary in her building since Howie and Ida moved into it in 1959. It may be the only unburgled apartment building in all of Manhattan.

The problem is that television programs aren't about normal

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people. Normal people don't draw ratings. Television is about crooks and killers and perverts. People in crisis. A constant theme of deviance and disaster forms the background of Ida's life. It's no wonder she thinks half her neighbors are Satanists, crack whores, and diamond smugglers.

"You wait and see," Ida said to me. "Becker in Seven C, he's a militia."

Jake and I were quiet as we took the 9 train back to the West Village. We were having an argument, but it was one we'd had so often we could do it in shorthand.

"What are we going to do about Ida?" I asked, meaning, 'She's getting weirder and more demanding every day and you're not taking any responsibility for her; I'm tired of being the one who always has to do all the caretaking for *your* maternal unit; women always get stuck with this sort of caretaking.'

"Nothing," Jake said, meaning, 'She's just an old woman and if you don't want to run errands for her just say no and don't make this into another gender issue, not everything is about gender.'

I sighed, meaning, 'Men never think it's about gender and it almost always is, and doing nothing is just an abdication of your responsibilities, which men always do because they know women will take up the slack.'

Jake opened his newspaper, meaning, 'Here we go again; I wonder how the Yankees did last night.'

I pulled the paperback novel out of my purse, meaning, 'Fine.'

Neither of us spoke until the train pulled into the Christopher Street station.

"A little kosher salt," Ida said on the telephone. "Not the big three-pound box. Who needs three pounds of salt? Homesteaders need that much salt, that's who. Pioneers in Kansas. Not Jews living in New York."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Only the salt," she said. "If it's not too much trouble. I wouldn't ask, but I have such a pain in my hip." A couple years ago, Ida was jostled while trying to buy some bialys at Zabars and she bumped her hip on a counter. She didn't even bother to see a doctor at the time, but she's been complaining about it ever since.

"Okay, I'll drop it off after work," I said.

"After work," Ida said and sighed enormously. "There's nothing wrong with after work. After work will be fine. I can sit here and wait until you get off work. Why should you go out of your way to bring an old woman salt in the middle of the day?"

My office is on Broadway, north of 110th. Jake and I live in the West Village below 14th. Ida lives near the 72nd Street subway station, directly on my way home. It made sense to drop off the

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salt on my way home. You'd think she could see that.

I counted to ten. "Do you need the salt now?" I asked.

"Aacch." Ida made a sound from deep inside her throat. It sounded like paper tearing. It's not a sound you hear from humans in Nebraska. "You're too busy to bring salt. I can wait."

"Maybe I can bring it to you during my lunch break," I said. I told myself it wasn't Jake's fault that I work nearer to Ida's apartment than he does. But I blame him anyway. I'm convinced he deliberately took a job on the Lower East Side so he'd never have to fetch Ida a box of kosher salt on his lunch break.

Kosher salt. Regular iodized salt won't do. No blue cylindrical package for Ida Gobel. No picture of a girl with an umbrella, no "When it rains, it pours." It has to be kosher salt. Not because Ida keeps kosher, but because she says kosher salt tastes better than *goyisher* salt.

The street was crowded. It always takes longer to move around Manhattan during the week before Thanksgiving. Everybody is shopping, tourists are in town for the big Macy's parade, and the panhandlers are out in force.

If the holiday lunch-hour congestion wasn't enough, there was a protest going on in front of the market near my office. The market was running a publicity event; they were going to give away a dozen turkeys on Thanksgiving day. Live turkeys.

To draw in customers, they kept the poor turkeys in a sort of pen in the back of the market, near the paper products. If you won a turkey, they'd slaughter it for you, roast it, and deliver it to your apartment Thanksgiving morning. Fresh turkey, the store said, just like the pilgrims had.

This, of course, had the animal rights activists up in arms. Some were protesting the conditions in which the turkeys were being held, others were protesting the idea of "murder for meat." One group stood in front of the market handing out recipes for a meat-free Thanksgiving.

The market only had the three-pound box of kosher salt. I fretted for a few moments wondering what to do. Buy the three-pound box? Go to Ida's neighborhood and search the markets there for a smaller box? Buy non-kosher salt? Should I call Ida and ask her?

Why was this even an issue? I asked myself angrily. I'm doing the woman a favor. On my *lunch hour.* I grabbed the three-pound box. Ida could pretend she was a homesteader. Maybe she could salt some fish.

I also picked up an orange and a banana to eat on the subway ride back to my office. It wasn't much of a lunch, but it would have to do.

As usual I could hear the television blaring through Ida's door. I rang the doorbell and almost immediately there was a scraping

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sound from behind the door. Ida pulling up a chair so she can look through the peephole. She's a small woman . . . maybe five-two. No bigger than a minute, my mom would say.

An eye appeared at the peephole. "You're alone?" Ida asked.

"Yes," I said. She knew Jake was at work. Jake never ran errands for her on weekdays. Why was she even asking?

"There's nobody in the hall?" she asked.

I looked both ways. "No, there's nobody in the hall. Open the door." I held up the bag from the market. "I have the salt."

That must have been the correct password because I could hear her dragging the chair away from the door and the clicking of her various locks. Ida's door has more locks than Alcatraz. I worry for her safety if there's ever a fire.

The door finally opened and I stepped in. Mrs. Klepfisch was there, of course.

"*Oy,* am I glad you're here," Ida said. Which surprised me. She'd never said that before. Not once in all the years Jake and I have been together had she said she was glad to see me. It surprised and worried me.

"What's the matter?" I asked. Mrs. Klepfisch took the grocery bag and clutched it to her ample bosom. She looked worried, too.

Ida pointed to a parcel sitting on the small table near the door. It was addressed to Karl Becker.

"You see?" Ida said. She pointed at the return label. New Order Military Supply. "Didn't I tell you Becker was a militia *trayfnyak?"*

Two questions immediately presented themselves. I decided to ignore the first question; whatever a *trayfnyak* was, I could assume it wasn't a compliment. I chose to focus on the more important question.

"Ida, what are you doing with Mr. Becker's package?" I asked.

"It was on the pickup table downstairs," she said. "I only took it so it wouldn't get stolen. You can't trust everybody in this building, you know. I was being a good neighbor. Isn't that right?" she appealed to Mrs. Klepfisch.

"A very good neighbor," Mrs. Klepfisch agreed. "All neighbors should be so good. We wouldn't have such problems in the world."

Ida picked up the package and handed it to me. "Take," she said. "And give it to Becker." She nodded toward the door.

"What?" I said. "Why don't you give it to him? He's your neighbor."

"I should give packages to a Nazi militia?" Ida asked. She looked to Mrs. Klepfisch for support.

I started to argue, but decided it wouldn't make any difference. It was quicker just to give in. "Is he home?"

"Becker?" Ida said. "Where else would he be? The White House?"

"He might have a job," I said. "He might be at work."

Ida turned to Mrs. Klepfisch, who was grasping my grocery bag

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like a life preserver. "Becker is home?" she asked.

Mrs. Klepfisch shrugged. "Where else would he be?"

Ida looked at me and shrugged too.

I sighed. "I'll be right back," I said.

I went to the next apartment and rang Mr. Becker's doorbell.

"Who is it?" he asked through the door.

That was a more complicated question than he realized. It would take too long to explain I was the responsible, long-term, live-in partner of his neighbor's orphaned nephew. "I'm Ann," I said. "I have a package that belongs to you."

He looked out the peephole, then opened the door as far as the chain would allow. He peeked around the door. All I could see was a suspicious eye and the bill of his baseball cap.

I held up the package for him to see.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"It was on the table in the entryway," I said. "My mother-in-law, Mrs. Gobel, picked it up for you. She was afraid it might get stolen."

"The old . . . woman next door?"

I smiled and nodded.

The door closed for a moment while Becker undid the chain. He quickly stepped into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind him. He was in his late twenties, vegetarian thin, with a short goatee and close-cropped hair. He wore a black rock-and-roll T-shirt and camouflage fatigue pants . . . just like Mrs. Klepfisch had said.

I handed him the package.

"This is the third time she's done that," Becker said angrily. "I told her last time to leave my packages alone."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know. I was just . . ."

"Next time she intercepts my mail, I'm going to contact the postal authorities," he said. "It's against the law to interfere with the mail."

"Oh I'm sure she didn't interfere with . . ."

"Has this been opened?" Becker asked, checking the package. "Did anybody open this?"

"No, of course not," I said. "Ida was just being a good neighbor. She was . . ."

"You tell her she'd better learn to mind her own business," he said. And he slipped quickly back into his apartment.

I stood there for a moment, shocked, before returning to Ida's apartment.

She and Mrs. Klepfisch had probably been eavesdropping; they were standing directly beside the door. And they were eating my lunch.

"You gave Becker the package?" Ida asked. She used her finger to pry off an orange wedge and popped it in her mouth. My orange.

"A *mitzvah* to bring fruit to old women," Mrs. Klepfisch said, delicately eating my banana.

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I sighed. "Yes, I gave him the package," I said. "You didn't tell me he'd already warned you once before not to interfere with his mail."

"Interfere?" Ida said. "Keeping your neighbor's mail safe, that's interfering?"

"To a militia, that's interfering," Mrs. Klepfisch said.

Ida nodded. "So?" she said to me. "Becker . . . is he a militia or what?"

I had to admit he'd seemed a bit odd. But New York City is full of odd folks. I checked my watch. "I have to get back to work," I said. "My lunch hour is almost over."

"You're not eating?" Ida asked. "They give you a lunch hour and you don't eat?"

"Dieting," Mrs. Klepfisch said, nodding and shrugging. "Go figure young women. All they do is diet. Air, they live off."

"I should pay you for the salt," Ida said. "But, *oy*, so much salt. A three-pound box? What am I going to do with so much salt?"

"Tell me again about the swastika you saw on the other package," I said.

Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch described it again. I made a quick sketch and showed it to them. "Is that what it looked like?" I asked.

"That's it," Ida said. She turned to Mrs. Klepfisch. "Is that it?"

I showed the sketch to Mrs. Klepfisch. "That's it," she said.

Ida beamed. "You see? A modern swastika. Becker is a Nazi militia."

But it wasn't a swastika at all. I'd sketched the international warning symbol for biohazardous material.

Jake and I had dinner together. On his way home from work he'd picked up some chicken *shawarma* from the Middle Eastern restaurant down the street. I'd stopped at the Indian place and picked up a seafood *biryani*. We sat on cushions on the floor in the living room while we ate and watched a television show about a small Irish town, broadcast from the Long Island PBS station. That's what passes for a family dinner in Manhattan.

When the show ended I told Jake about Mr. Becker.

"There was definitely something spooky about him," I said. "He didn't want me to see inside his apartment."

"Maybe his apartment wasn't clean," Jake said. "Maybe he was embarrassed."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm beginning to think Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch may be on to something. Does that make me completely nuts?"

Jake looked at me for a moment. "You mean because you think Ida's neighbor is some sort of military lunatic who is having biohazardous material mailed to his apartment?" Jake asked. He shook his head. "No, I don't think that makes you *completely* nuts. But close."

"So what do you think?"

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He hesitated. "I think you will have much to report when you return to your home planet."

"Jake, I'm serious," I said. "I remember hearing a news report on National Public Radio about this sort of thing. Militia groups that managed to get their hands on infectious agents. Like anthrax. They posed as legitimate researchers and people just handed over some anthrax bacteria."

"I think anthrax is a virus," Jake said. "Not a bacteria."

"Jake, what if one of those groups somehow obtained something like ebola?"

"Ebola is definitely a virus," Jake said. "Although I'm not sure what the difference is between a virus and a bacteria. Size, maybe?"

"Jake," I said.

He sighed deeply. "What do you want me say, Ann?" he asked. "Do you want me to say I think this Becker is having test tubes packed with ebola delivered to his apartment? Through the mail? Does that make any sense at all? You won't even trust the post office to send cookies to your nephew in the army."

"The people who got the anthrax got it by mail order," I said. "Why would Becker be getting a package with a biohazard warning on it?"

"You didn't see that package," Jake pointed out.

He was right, I hadn't. "But they described it," I said. "And when I sketched the biohazard warning sign, they said that was it."

"And they said it was a modern swastika," Jake said. "Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch aren't the most reliable witnesses. You probably could have sketched the outline of a maple leaf and they'd have said, 'Yes, that's it, a modern swastika.'"

"Ida is your . . . parental unit," I said.

Jake nodded. "And I love her as if she were my real mother," he said. "But she's made crazy accusations about people in her building before."

"She was right about Meghyn on the twelfth floor," I said. "Ida said she was a pagan, and she is."

"Ann, this is New York," Jake said. "Apartment buildings in New York are required by law to house a certain number of lunatics. Ida's building already has three lunatics . . . Ida, Mrs. Klepfisch, and Meghyn on twelve. Somebody would have to move out before an anthrax-packing militiaman could move in."

At 4:30 the next afternoon—Tuesday—Mrs. Klepfisch called me at the office. I was expecting the usual pre-Thanksgiving chore. Pick up some kasha, maybe. Or some roma tomatoes, not too ripe.

Instead, all I heard was an urgent whisper. "Ida wants you should come right over," Mrs. Klepfisch breathed.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

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"It's Becker," she said. "You should come over. And Jacob, he should come, too. Now I have to get off the phone." And she hung up.

I called right back, of course. But there was no answer.

So I called Jake at his office and told him what Mrs. Klepfisch had said. Most of it. I didn't mention Becker's name. Jake said he'd meet me at Ida's apartment.

I slipped as quickly as possible through the crowds of shoppers, panhandlers, and turkey-abuse protesters and hurried into the 110th Street subway station. At that time of day, the subway is quicker than a taxi.

When I got to Ida's apartment, I knew something horrible had happened. It was quiet. I couldn't hear her television. For the first time since her husband died, Ida's television was silent.

I felt a sort of dread as I stood in front of her apartment door. Something must have happened to Ida. Maybe Becker had assaulted her.

I rang the doorbell and heard the chair being pulled up to the door. An eye peered through the peephole, and I heard Ida asking, "You're alone?"

"Ida, let me in," I said. "What's going on here? Mrs. Klepfisch called . . ."

The door opened and there was Ida, making shushing sounds and rushing me inside. "Not so loud," she said. "Come in, come in, come in. Such a noise you're making."

There were a thousand things I could have said . . . had I been able to speak. But I couldn't. I was shocked into silence. There, sitting on a footstool up against the wall, was Mrs. Klepfisch. She had a stethoscope in her ears with the barrel pressed up against the wall. The wall to Becker's apartment.

"*What* is going on here?" I asked.

Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch both shushed me with vigor.

"It's Becker," Ida said in a loud whisper. "They're going to do it tomorrow night."

"Who's going to do what tomorrow night?" I asked.

Ida shushed me again. "What, I don't know," she whispered. She nodded toward Mrs. Klepfisch. "She thinks a bomb. Me, I think maybe a bomb, maybe not a bomb. Who knows what goes on in the mind of a Nazi militia?"

I closed my eyes and held up my hand. "Wait a minute," I said. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes again. "Too much, too fast," I said. "I think you'd better start at the beginning. And this had better be good."

It was.

An hour earlier, as Mrs. Klepfisch was returning to Ida's apartment after her customary afternoon nap, she saw a man ring the doorbell at Becker's apartment. Becker, it seems, had never had a

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visitor before. So Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch, overcome by curiosity, had turned off the television and pressed their ears against the wall separating the two apartments.

The walls of the old pre-war building were too thick for them to hear anything. Mrs. Klepfisch had remembered a movie in which somebody listened through a wall using a drinking glass, so they'd tried that. It was a bit more successful, but they still couldn't hear clearly.

Then Ida remembered she still had the stethoscope and blood-pressure cuff she'd used when her husband Howie was ill. The stethoscope worked well enough; they could actually hear parts of the conversation.

That, Ida told me, is when they discovered they were going to do "it" tomorrow night, the night before Thanksgiving. Whatever "it" was.

"Ida, you can't just listen in on your neighbors like that," I whispered. "It's probably illegal."

"We should let Nazi militias make bombs?" she asked.

"You don't know they're making bombs," I whispered. "You don't even know they're Nazis."

Ida gazed up toward heaven briefly and muttered something I didn't quite catch. She took me by the hand and pulled me to the footstool where Mrs. Klepfisch sat.

"You listen," she whispered. She fussed at Mrs. Klepfisch, getting her to stand up and taking the stethoscope from her. She thrust it out toward me.

I shook my head. "I'm not going to listen in on your neighbor's private conversations," I said.

She pushed the stethoscope at me once more. "You listen," she said again, "and tell me Becker, he's not a Nazi militia making a bomb."

So I did. I snatched the stethoscope from her and sat on the footstool.

"Wait!" Mrs. Klepfisch hissed. She pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to me. "Wipe first," she said.

I wiped the earpieces, put them in my ears, and pressed the barrel of the stethoscope against the wall.

I could hear laughter. It sounded like it was coming from a long distance and through water, but I could hear laughter. I heard a voice say something about "making the evening news" and then more laughter.

I closed my eyes, hoping that would somehow make the voices more clear. One voice said, "Nobody will be expecting anything like this." The other replied, "We're going to get a lot of publicity out of this. It's just what we need to make a name for ourselves."

I opened my eyes. And there, standing in the doorway, was Jake. Staring at me in shock and horror.

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Wednesday morning, the day before Thanksgiving, I closed the door to my office and told my coworkers I was working on a special project. I spent all morning at my computer doing an Internet search on bio-terrorism. I knew about the Tokyo subway attack in 1995, but I had no idea there had been such an increase in biological threats in the U.S. In 1999, there had been nearly one incident or threat every week. Every *week*. And a lot of them were connected to right-wing militia groups.

By lunchtime I was so alarmed and distressed I nearly called Jake. I nearly forgot how angry I was at him. He'd been at his absolute snottiest the night before at Ida's apartment. Angry, dismissive, refusing to listen to explanations. Like the spoiled only child he was.

Ida, to her credit, had actually tried to defend me. Sort of. "It's such a big deal she should put her ear to a wall?" she'd said to Jake. "You're standing up for a Nazi? You should be proud that she . . ." Then Ida seemed to realize she was taking my side against her Jacob. We couldn't have that.

"Ach, why are we arguing?" Ida had asked. She'd put her hand on Jake's arm. "You should try a little of the carrot cake I made from a recipe given to me by Lottie Meckler. You know Lottie Meckler, the caterer? A sweet woman and a good cook, although myself, I'm not so impressed with her blintzes."

Jake and I had left Ida's apartment without tasting Lottie Meckler's carrot cake. And we hadn't spoken since. Normally, after an argument, I'm the one to break the silence, to patch things up, to make the first conciliatory move. Maybe it's a Woman Thing; women feel the need to resolve issues, to make them better. Men seem to lack the resolution gene. I suspect it's evidence that men are less evolved.

After I take that first step toward reconciliation, Jake always responds, and he's always equally contrite . . . but only after, never first. This time, I promised myself, I wouldn't be the first to apologize.

So there I sat, staring at my computer, wishing I could discuss everything with Jake. I wanted his advice. I was convinced Becker and his friend *were* up to something. And I was convinced Becker *had* received a package with a biohazard warning label on it. Ida and Mrs. Klepfisch may be a little loopy, I told myself, but it didn't mean they were wrong.

I considered calling the police or the FBI . . . but what would I tell them? I'd sound like a crank. I thought about calling the *New York Times* or the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. I even thought about calling WNYC, the local public radio station.

In the end, I didn't call anybody. I was more afraid of making a

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fool of myself than I was of anthrax or ebola. Instead, I left work early and went home.

Jake was already there. He'd also been distracted at work, so he left early. He was in a conciliatory mood and trying very hard to be sweet. He took my coat and scarf when I entered and hung them up, a thing he rarely does. In a vase in the living room . . . freshly cut flowers.

He was trying to make it easy for me to apologize to him so that *he* could apologize to me. And I was feeling so frightened and lonely that I desperately wanted to give in.

I was saved, however, by the telephone. It was Ida, of course. She wanted to know if we could drop by and bring her a few onions. If we weren't too busy to help an old woman whose hip hurt like a thousand needles were being jabbed into it. Big needles, not those little tiny needles with the eye so small you need a microscope to thread it.

"Sure," I said. "We'll bring you some onions." It would give Jake and me something to do.

"The sweet onions," she said. "Not the hot ones. *Oy,* the hot onions, when I was your age and thin like a straw I could eat the hot onions. Now . . ." And I could actually hear her shrug over the telephone. "It isn't easy, you know, growing old."

"Let's get something to eat first, shall we?" Jake suggested. "We haven't been to the White Horse in a while."

That's how sweet he was being. Like a lot of native New Yorkers, Jake sneers at the White Horse Tavern. I like the place, myself. It's the pub where Dylan Thomas had his last drink. Jake says the bar is always full of literary-minded tourists from Nebraska. And maybe it is. It's one of the reasons I like it.

I figured that was as close to an apology as I was going to get. So I smiled and agreed that a pub dinner sounded wonderful. And that was as close to an apology as *he* was going to get.

Afterwards, we bought the onions and caught the subway uptown to Ida's apartment. We stayed long enough to taste some of Lottie Meckler's carrot cake. Mrs. Klepfisch said the icing was too sweet and suggested it would probably send her into some sort of sugar-induced seizure.

It was a nice evening. Nobody said a word about Becker or Nazis or bio-terrorism or plans to release deadly viruses into the population.

It was after 9 P.M. when we left. Ida insisted we take some carrot cake with us, even though we'd be returning the next afternoon for the traditional Thanksgiving poached fish. Outside her apartment building we paused a moment to debate whether it would be quicker at that hour to take the subway or to walk over to Columbus and catch the number 11 bus. Over the last few years I've

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actually developed an opinion about such things. It's one of the first signs a person is becoming a New Yorker.

As Jake and I debated the merits of each plan, Becker walked out of the building. He was wearing camouflage pants, a black knit watch cap, and a black military-looking anorak. A small, dark duffel-like bag was slung over his shoulder. He looked like the cover boy for Terrorist Quarterly.

I gave him a neighborly smile as he hurried by. He zipped up his anorak and ignored us.

As he zipped the jacket, I saw the sweatshirt he was wearing. Black with grey block letters. ARYAN, it said.

And I *knew.* I knew right then and there Becker was on his way to do . . . whatever he'd been talking about the night before. I knew it in my bones. I knew it with mathematical certainty. And I knew what I had to do.

"Jake, do you love me?" I asked.

He gave me a confused look. "Yes, of course," he said.

I took his arm. "Then I want you to come with me," I said. "It doesn't matter if you believe me or not, just come with me."

"Come with you?" he said. "Come with you where?"

I pointed after Becker. "I have to see where he's going," I said. "I know you think it's crazy . . . but I have to do it. I *have* to follow him. Come with me, Jake."

He looked at me, looked after Becker, looked back at me. I held my breath for half a dozen long heartbeats.

"We'd better hurry," Jake said. "Or we'll lose him."

I don't think I've ever loved Jake more than at that moment. I threw my arms around him and kissed him.

He kissed me quickly. "No time for this now," he said. He took my hand and we set off in pursuit.

Becker was already turning the corner, but we were only a moment behind him. Within a block it was obvious where he was headed.

Every Thanksgiving Day for the last who-knows-how-many years Macy's department store has sponsored a big parade that runs down Central Park West. The parade is known for two things. First, the appearance of Santa Claus, signaling the official start of the Christmas shopping season, even though every store in the continental U.S. has been displaying Christmas items since Halloween. And second, the massive gas-filled balloons in the shape of cartoon characters.

The balloons are inflated the night before the parade. The city sets up police barricades and closes down a few blocks near the Museum of Natural History, and the empty balloons, big unrecognizable slabs of plastic, are laid out on the street under big nets. Then they are slowly filled with some sort of gas. Eventually, giant

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Bullwinkles and Garfields and Kermit the Frogs fill the streets of the Upper West Side, all trapped in netting like monsters in bad Japanese movies. It's a strange and remarkable sight.

The inflating of the balloons has become an event in itself, almost as popular as watching the parade. Tens of thousands of people cram into those few city blocks on the night before Thanksgiving to watch the balloons being inflated.

And that, it appeared, was where Becker was heading.

I had a very clear and very horrible vision of Becker standing in front of Kermit Bound, grinning maniacally and uncorking a vial of airborne ebola virus. I gripped Jake's arm tightly.

But Becker stopped before reaching the police barricades. He leaned against a mailbox at the last corner on which vehicle traffic could pass.

Jake and I, masked by the crowd moving toward the balloons, made our way up the opposite side of the street. Becker didn't see us. He was ignoring the crowd. He'd pulled a pink sheet of paper out of his duffel and was reading it.

A political statement, I thought. A right-wing manifesto blaming all the problems of the world on Jews or people of African descent or the Internet. Or maybe it was a military-style communiqué to be sent to the press after he'd released the ebola into the Thanksgiving crowd.

As Jake and I lurked in the crowd across the street from Becker, two other young men walked up behind him. They were also dressed in the height of commando fashion. Becker, immersed in his manifesto, didn't hear them coming. They moved toward him slowly, grinning. One suddenly clapped his hand on Becker's shoulder.

Becker, startled, jumped and dropped the pink sheet of paper. The wind blew it across the street in our direction. Jake scooted after it.

The two newcomers were laughing. Becker was clearly irritated for a moment, then he also began to laugh. They looked like boys, teasing and poking and taking delight in harassing each other.

Then Becker glanced around for the pink paper he'd dropped. And he noticed Jake picking it up.

Jake, walking back to me, didn't notice Becker watching him.

"This is odd," Jake said. He held the paper out to me.

But I was looking at Becker. The laughter had died from his face. He recognized me.

"Jake . . ." I said. I touched his arm and nodded toward Becker.

Becker was speaking to his companions, pointing at us.

"Oh-oh," Jake said.

Becker started across the street toward us, his two friends following.

"Let's go," Jake said. He took me by the arm and we ducked under the police barricade, joining the balloon-watching throng.

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The street was jammed thick with people, but we slid, maneuvered, and elbowed our way through. Somewhere in all that mob there had to be a police officer.

If you live in New York City you learn how to move through a crowd. For Jake it's second nature, but I grew up in the open spaces of Nebraska and I'm not as skilled at it. Before moving to New York the biggest crowd I'd ever seen was at the Nebraska State Fair.

So it's not surprising that one moment Jake and I were next to each other and the next moment we were separated. He zigged, I zagged . . . and I was suddenly alone in the crowd.

I looked around me desperately. I looked for Jake, but he wasn't there. I looked for a police officer, but there wasn't one. I looked for Becker and his buddies—and there they were. Twenty yards away, moving through the crowd in an awkward, elbowy, distinctly non-New York way.

I plunged through the crowd, ducking a bit to make myself smaller and taking off my perky beret and red scarf. I weaseled my way in front of a large family of Dominicans who were gazing in wonder at a twenty-foot-tall balloon of a cartoon princess in pink. I knelt as if to tie my shoe and remained there for a minute.

When I straightened up, Becker and his friends were nowhere to be seen. Neither was Jake. I stood at that spot for maybe ten minutes, hoping Jake or a police officer would walk by, fearing that Becker or his buddies would.

I forced myself to calm down and take a few deep, panic-reducing breaths. Then I asked myself a question: What does a person do when her live-in boyfriend disappears at night in a huge holiday crowd and camouflage-clad bio-terrorists threaten the most vibrant city in the free world? The answer was obvious. You go to the woman who fed you carrot cake.

I headed back to Ida's apartment building, walking quickly and looking behind me often. My Midwestern practicality began to assert itself. I knew what I would do. I would go to Ida's apartment, I would call the police, and I would make them take me seriously. And if they refused to take me seriously, I'd put Ida on the phone. If you really want something done in New York City, get an old Jewish woman who is worried about her son.

I didn't even have to go to Ida's apartment. She and Mrs. Klepfisch were standing with Jake outside of the building. He was still holding the pink sheet of paper Becker had dropped.

"Here is Ann now," Ida said. "Didn't I say not to worry?"

Jake and I kissed and hugged, clinging together for a long moment.

"Okay, already," Ida said. "Enough with the smooches. At a time like this, all they think about is smooches."

"Kids," Mrs. Klepfisch said, nodding in agreement.

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"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"I think we should call the police," Jake said. "I don't know what's going on, but it doesn't sound right." He showed me the pink sheet of paper.

It was a flyer labeled "Poor People's Feast," advertising a free Thanksgiving dinner given for the poor at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Which is on Amsterdam at 112th Street, just a few blocks from my office.

"You don't think . . ." I said. "They wouldn't . . . do something at the cathedral."

"Nazis," Ida said. "What they wouldn't do, you don't want to think about."

While I tried to parse that sentence, Ida turned to Mrs. Klepfisch. "Go," she said, waving her toward the apartment building. "And call the police."

"Ida, what are you going to do?" Mrs. Klepfisch asked.

"I'm going to go look for Nazi militias," she said.

"Oh no you're not," Jake said. "You're going to . . . "

Ida put her hands in her coat pockets and set off walking. She had an odd little hitch in her walk. Maybe her hip really did hurt.

"*Oy,*" Mrs. Klepfisch said. "I'll go call the police."

I set out after Ida.

Jake stood there at a loss for a moment, like a general with no troops to command. Then he hurried to catch up with us.

To his credit, Jake didn't give us a hard time. "Okay," he said in a resigned voice, "what's the plan?"

"The plan is the eleven bus," Ida said.

"Maybe we should grab a cab," Jake suggested.

"A taxicab? At this hour?" Ida asked. "On the night before Thanksgiving?" She gave a shrug. Even through her coat I could read the shrug. It suggested taxicabs were more rare than pearls.

"A cab would be faster," Jake said.

"If we got one, it would be faster," Ida said, without slowing down. "If we didn't get one, then it's not so fast. You want to look for taxicabs, go look for taxicabs. I say the bus. Slow and steady, like that turtle in the story. You know, the one with the rabbit."

Jake and I had a hurried discussion and decided to split up. Ida and I would hop the M11 bus, Jake would try to flag a cab, and we'd rendezvous in front of the Hungarian Pastry Shop on Amsterdam Avenue, across the street from the cathedral. It wasn't much of a plan, but we hadn't much time.

Ida was probably right. The bus was very likely the quickest way to get from the West 70s up to 112th Street. But it lacked drama. It's difficult to remain firm in your resolve to search out fascist bio-terrorists when you're jammed on a bus with a group of commuters heading home to Washington Heights.

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We got off the bus on Broadway and 112th, directly in front of Tom's Restaurant. The Seinfeld diner. The people inside were eating hamburgers and gyros and meat loaf with mashed potatoes as if they were safe. And at the far end of 112th Street, lit up against the night, loomed the massive, unfinished Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Ida set off down the street immediately.

It was almost too much for me. Giant gas-filled balloons of cartoon figures, iconic television diners, and an old Jewish woman striding determinedly toward an urban medieval cathedral. For a moment I felt as if I was hallucinating. But that's New York City.

Ida took my arm as we reached Amsterdam Avenue. Vehicle traffic on the street was very light. All the decent and sensible people who weren't out watching balloons being inflated were eating in diners or at home with their families.

We spotted our three terrorists across the street, idling on the cathedral steps near the fenced stone yard.

Ida and I turned south and walked to the pastry shop. Jake wasn't there. We stepped far enough into the recessed doorway to conceal ourselves while still being able to observe the men.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Ida said. "You think I've done this before?"

"What are they waiting for? Why are they just hanging out on the steps?"

"Who knows?" Ida said. "Go figure a Nazi militia."

Just then a small black van heading south on Amsterdam slowed in front of the cathedral. The three men suddenly seemed to have a purpose. One of them gave the van a thumbs-up sign and it continued south.

The men crossed to our side of the street and began down the sidewalk . . . directly toward the pastry shop.

"*Oy-oy-oy!*" Ida said.

I had to agree. "Right," I said. "*Oy.*"

Ida looked up at the oily black New York sky. "Of course," she said, with a weary shrug. "*Mah nishtanu?* Why should this night be different?"

I pulled her deeper into the shadows of the dark pastry shop's recessed doorway and hissed for her to be quiet. There was a chance, I thought, that they'd hurry right by us without looking into the doorway. And that's exactly what they did.

I thought my knees would give out on me. I thought I would shiver and collapse in relief. I even thought, for a brief alarming instant, that I might wet my pants.

But Ida didn't give me time. A moment after the three men had passed by, she poked her head out of the doorway.

I pulled her back. "What are you doing?" I whispered.

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"I'm watching," she said. "What do you think I'm doing?" And she peeked her head out of the doorway again.

So I peeked too, looking over her head. I saw our terrorists turn the corner onto 110th Street and head west toward Broadway.

Ida tugged at my coat sleeve and stepped back onto the sidewalk. I muttered a quiet curse at Jake for being late and followed. She was hurrying along, doing a strange little Eastern European hopping march step. Every third or fourth stride she gave a tiny leap, as if she'd received a mild electrical shock. Her hip, I suppose.

We cautiously peered around the corner. The three men were almost at the end of the block. The black van must have circled the block, because it was suddenly driving by us again, turning onto 110th. It drove slowly down the street and turned north on Broadway. To circle the block again, I assumed. A getaway van.

Becker and his two buddies stopped beside the shallow access lane which serviced the market on Broadway. I'd walked by that access lane a thousand times while running errands. It's where the deliveries were made. It looked like an alley, but it was only ten feet deep. It was protected by a tall chain-link fence topped with coiled razor wire.

Becker was fiddling with his duffel.

"What's he doing?" Ida asked. She leaned forward, as if another three inches would bring the scene in focus for her. "My eyes aren't so good as they were."

"I don't know," I said. "He's getting something from his bag."

"That much I can see."

While the other two men kept watch, Becker pulled a long-handled pair of bolt cutters from his duffel. He quickly cut the lock that secured the chain-link fence.

All three men stepped inside.

Ida took a deep breath and muttered something in Yiddish. "Go," she said to me, and patted me on the shoulder. "Find a phone. Call the police." And with that she started down the street.

I reached out and grabbed her coat by the shoulder. "What are you doing?" I asked her. "Are you crazy? Wait for the police. Wait for Jake."

"I should wait until they set off their bomb?" Ida said. "I should wait until my boy comes so they can kill him, too?"

I gripped her shoulder. "Ida, don't be . . ."

As I looked at her face I saw how terribly scared she was. She believed she was about to die. Yet she was still going to walk down the street and confront those men. Even though she knew it wouldn't do any good. Because that's what mothers did.

"I'm going with you," I said.

Ida shook my hand off her shoulder and glared at me so hard I took a step back. "Go!" she hissed. "Find a phone. There's no time

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for this." She headed down the street, limping.

After I watched her take half a dozen steps, I turned back around the corner to find a telephone.

Here is a good thing about Manhattan: In Manhattan there is a pay phone on almost every block. This one was no exception. There, no more than fifteen feet away from the corner, was a pay phone.

Here is a bad thing about Manhattan: In Manhattan not every pay phone works. That one didn't. Nor did the one a block north. But the one across the street, almost directly in front of the cathedral, gave me a dial tone that sounded sweet as music.

I dialed 911. Five rings, no answer. Ten rings, no answer. So I dropped the receiver. I didn't hang it up, I just let it dangle at the end of the coiled metal cord. Eventually somebody would answer, and when they got no response they'd trace the call to that location. Surely they'd send a car to see what had happened.

I couldn't wait. I had to go after Ida. She had done what mothers do, even though she was frightened. I could do what daughters do, even though I was frightened. It didn't really matter that she hadn't given birth to the man I wasn't married to. She was his mother and I was her daughter, and that's all there was to it. For family, you'll do anything.

I ran down to 110th and around the corner, and I didn't slow down until I noticed the van. It was parked directly in front of the access lane leading to the market. The side door was open. One of the terrorists stood beside it.

Ida was nowhere to be seen.

The man by the van turned and looked at me. I slowed down to a brisk walk but kept moving forward.

I've heard interviews with heroes . . . firefighters who run into burning buildings, police officers who rescue hostages, ordinary citizens who crawl through earthquake wreckage to drag out survivors. They all talk about how the world seemed to slow down around them, how everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Maybe it works that way for heroes. Maybe it's just us cowards who find that everything goes by in a frantic, crazed, adrenalin blur.

I had one coherent thought, and it kept echoing in my head in rhythm with my hurried steps, like a mantra. "Oh my God, what do I do, oh my God, what do I do?"

I was about thirty feet from the van when Ida came out of the access lane. She was carrying something in her arms. Becker was on one side of her, the third terrorist on the other. Ida handed the thing in her arms to the man standing by the van door, then Becker took her arm and helped her into the van. The other men followed her in.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Hey!"

Becker stopped, one foot in the van, and turned toward me. I ran

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up to him and whopped him with my purse. I aimed for his head, but he ducked and held up an arm to block it.

"What're you doing?" he said.

"*Oy-oy-oy,*" Ida said from the van. "Stop with the hitting and get in, get in."

She was sitting in one of the rear seats, her short legs dangling, waving me into the van.

I stared at her for a moment, wondering what was going on. There hadn't been enough time for her to go through that hostage-captor bonding business.

"We don't have much time here," the driver of the van said.

"Please," Becker said.

"Hurry," Ida hissed. "You want we should get caught by the cops? Get in."

So I did.

The back of the van was penned off. It was full of turkeys.

ARANY. Animal Rights Action, New York. Printed on a sweatshirt, ARANY looks a lot like ARYAN. Especially if you're expecting to see Aryan. So I made a mistake. So sue me.

I was right about Mrs. Klepfisch's New Age swastika, though. It *was* a biohazard symbol. But the package with the biohazard symbol Karl Becker had received didn't contain vials of deadly anthrax or ebola. It was a T-shirt and a compact-disc recording. From the rock band BioHazard.

Is it my fault I don't keep current with heavy-metal music?

The military catalogs and the package from New Order Military Supply? They were for the dark clothing and for the books on special operations for urban warfare. How else would a group of nice, middle-class college kids learn how to break into markets and liberate a dozen domestic turkeys?

That's what it was all about. The turkeys. And the publicity. ARANY, like the other animal rights groups, was opposed to the market's Thanksgiving publicity stunt.

They weren't satisfied with protesting in front of the market, though. They decided to free the turkeys and spirit them away to an organic farm upstate where, I presume, the birds would live full and rewarding lives eating pumpkin seeds. It would be a publicity coup for a new and largely unknown animal rights group.

Becker had quickly explained the situation to Ida when she marched up and confronted him. Ida has her faults . . . lots of them, in fact . . . but indecisiveness isn't one of them. When she learned what the three young men were doing, she warned them I'd gone to call the police and she offered to help with the turkeys. Her parents had raised chickens in the *shtetl* back in the old country. What was a turkey but a big chicken?

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After they bundled me in the van, we drove around the block, returning once again to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Jake was there, talking on the pay phone I had so carefully left off the hook. He had arrived by taxi a few minutes earlier, found the receiver dangling, hung it up, and called Ida's apartment for news.

The ARANY strike force dropped Ida and me off, as Jake stood there gawking.

"Who are you talking to?" Ida asked.

"Uh . . . Mrs. Klepfisch," he said. "Whose van? What's going on? Where's Becker?"

Ida took the receiver and asked Mrs. Klepfisch to put on some tea. And to see if maybe there was some slivovitz in the cupboard over the refrigerator.

"Have I got a story," she said.

Jake and I held hands as we watched the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade move slowly and noisily down Central Park West. When the giant pink princess balloon went by, restrained from flying off into the Manhattan skyline by a cheery crew of young men and women, I was struck by how surreal my life had become. As a young girl growing up on a farm in Nebraska, I'd watched the parade on television every year. And every year I'd felt a strangely un-Nebraskan pull to make my way to New York City, where anything seemed possible. I knew that Mom and Dad, back on the farm, would have the television on as they gathered the pumpkin pies and the green bean casserole they'd take down the road to Aunt Marge's house, where she'd serve a big ham and a twenty-five pound turkey to our extended family. Mom and Dad would be watching the crowd and shaking their heads and wondering about their peculiar daughter.

I was wondering about me, too. The night before, I'd been terrified, hiding behind a family of Dominicans as they stared, transfixed, at the balloon that was now passing by. Now I felt a powerful sense of wonder and joy at my life, such a buoyant sense of happiness that I had to hook my arm through Jake's to keep myself from floating off like the giant pink princess.

We left before the parade was done and walked back to Ida's building. The apartment was redolent with the smell of poached Thanksgiving fish. Ida was in the kitchen, stirring something in a pot. Mrs. Klepfisch was asleep and snoring softly in front of the television, which was tuned to the parade. Somewhere in upstate New York a dozen turkeys were kicking up their heels.

"Jacob, darling, come taste this," Ida said. "See if it needs some salt."

"Can I help somehow?" I offered.

"Fffttt," Ida said. "I'm so old I need help? Go and sit." ●

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FAIR EXCHANGE

by Ruth Rendell

"You're looking for Tom Dorchester, aren't you?" Penelope said.

I nodded. "How did you know?"

"I've been expecting you to ask. I mean, he's always been at this conference in the past. Quite a fixture. This must be the first he hasn't come to in—what? Fifteen years? Twenty?"

"He's not here, then?"

"He's dead."

I wanted to say, "He can't be!" But that's absurd. Anyone can be dead. Here today and gone tomorrow, as the saying goes. Still, the more full of vitality a person is, the more you feel he has a firmer grasp on life than the rest of us. Only violence, some appalling accident, could prise him loose. And Tom was—had been, I should say—more vital, more enthusiastic, and more interested in everything than most people. He seemed to love and hate more intensely, especially to love. I remember him once saying he needed no more than five hours' sleep a night, there was too much to do, to learn, to appreciate, to waste time sleeping. And then his wife had become ill, very ill. Much of his abundant energy he devoted to finding a cure for her particular kind of cancer. Or trying to find it.

I said, stupidly, I suppose, "But it was Frances who was going to die."

Penelope gave me a strange, indecipherable look. "I'll tell you about it, if you like. It's an odd story. Of course, I don't know how much you know."

"About what? I wouldn't have called Tom a close friend but I'd known him for years. I know he adored Frances. I mean, I adore Marian but—well, you know what I mean. He was like a young

Ruth Rendell is the author of more than fifty novels. She is a winner of the Grandmaster Award and three Edgar Allan Poe awards from the Mystery Writers of America and four Gold Dagger awards from England's Crime Writers Association. In 1997, she was named a life peer in the House of Lords. In this issue we present three top-notch Rendell stories, all previously unpublished in the U.S. ¶

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lover. To say he worshipped the ground she trod on wouldn't be an exaggeration."

Penelope took her cigarettes out of her handbag and offered me one.

"I've given it up."

"I wish I could, but I know my limitations. Now, d'you want the story?" I nodded. "You may not like it. It's pretty awful one way and another. He killed himself, you know."

"He *what? Tom Dorchester?*"

"Did away with himself, committed suicide, whatever."

There was only one possible event that could make this believable. "Ah, you mean Frances did die?"

Penelope shook her head. She took a sip of her drink. "It was June or July of last year, about a month after the conference. You'll remember Tom only came for two days because he felt he couldn't leave Frances any longer than that, though their younger daughter was with her. They had two daughters, both married, and the older one has three children. The eldest child was twelve at the time."

"I had dinner with Tom," I said. "There were a couple of other people there, but he mostly talked to me. He was telling me about some miracle cure they'd tried on Frances but it hadn't worked."

"It was at a clinic in Switzerland. They dehydrate you and give you nothing but walnuts to eat, something like that. When she came back and she was worse than ever, Tom found a healer. I actually met her. Chris and I went round to Tom's one evening and this woman was there. Very weird, she was, very weird indeed."

"What do you mean, weird?"

"Well, you think of a healer as laying on hands, don't you? Or reciting mantras while using herbal remedies, something like that. This woman wasn't like that. She did it all by talk and the power of thought. That's what she said, the power of thought. Her name was Davina Tarsis and she was quite young. Late thirties, early forties, very strangely dressed. Not that sort of floaty hippie look, oriental garments and beads and whatever, not like that at all. She was very thin, only a very thin woman could have got away with wearing skin-tight white leggings and a white tunic with a great orange sun printed on the front of it. Her hair was long and dyed a deep purplish red. I don't know why I say 'was.' I expect she's still got purple hair. No makeup, of course, a scrubbed face and a ring in one nostril—not a stud, a ring.

"Tom thought she was wonderful. He claimed she'd cured a woman who had been having radiotherapy at the same time as Frances. Now, the odd thing was that she didn't talk much to Frances at all—I had a feeling Frances didn't altogether care for her. She talked to Tom. Not while we were there, I don't mean that. I mean in private. Apparently they had long sessions, like a kind of

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mad form of psychotherapy. Chris said maybe she was making a play for Tom, but I don't think it was that. I think she really believed in what she was doing and so did he. So, my God, did he.

"She taught him to believe that anything you wished for hard enough you could have. He told me that—not at the time, when it was all over."

"What do you mean," I said, "when it was all over?"

"When Tom had got what he wanted."

"Presumably, that was for Frances to be cured."

"That's right. He got very emotional with me one night—Chris was out somewhere—and he started crying and sobbing. I know men do cry these days, but I've never known a man cry like Tom did that night. The tears poured out of his eyes. There was quite a long time when he couldn't speak, he choked on the words. It was dreadful, I didn't know what to do. I gave him some brandy but he'd only take a sip of it because he was driving and he had to go back to Frances before his daughter and her daughter had to go home. That's the nine-year-old, Emma, she's called. Anyway, he calmed down after a bit and then he said he couldn't live without Frances, he couldn't imagine life without her, he'd kill himself . . ."

"Ah," I said.

"Ah, nothing. That had nothing to do with it. Frances went back into hospital soon after that. They were trying some new kind of chemotherapy on her. Tom hadn't any faith in it. By then he only had faith in Tarsis. He was having daily talk sessions with her. He'd taken leave from his job and he'd spend an entire morning talking to Tarsis, mostly about his feelings for Frances, I gather, and how he felt about the rest of his family, and how he and Frances had met, and so on. She'd make him go over and over it, and the more he repeated himself the more approving she was.

"Frances came home and she was very ill, thin, with no appetite. Her hair began to fall out. She could barely walk. The side effects from the chemo were the usual ghastly thing, nausea and faintness and ringing in the ears and all that. Tarsis came round and took a look at her, said the chemo was a mistake but in spite of it, she thought she could heal Frances completely. Then came the crunch. I didn't know this at the time, Tom didn't tell me until—oh, I don't know, two or three months afterwards. But this is what Tarsis said to him.

"They talked while Frances was asleep. Tarsis said, 'What would you give to make Frances live?' Well, of course, Tom asked what she meant and she said, 'Whose life would you give in exchange for Frances's life?' Tom said that was nonsense, you couldn't trade one person's life for another, and Tarsis said, oh yes, you could. The power of thought could do that for you. She'd trained Tom in practising the power of thought and now all he had to do was wish for

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Frances to live. Only he had to offer someone else up in her place.

"That was when he started to see her for what she was. A charlatan. But he played along, he said. He wanted to see what she'd do. Called her bluff, was what he said, but he was deceiving himself in that. He still half-believed. Who would he offer up, she asked him. 'Oh, anyone you like,' he said, and he laughed. She was deadly serious. That day she'd met Tom's elder daughter and the granddaughter Emma. Tom said—he hated telling me this but on the other hand he was really past caring what he told anyone—he said Emma hadn't been very polite to Davina Tarsis. She'd sort of stared at her, at the tight leggings and the sun on her tunic, and sneered a bit, I suppose, and then she'd said it wasn't Tarsis but the chemo that was doing her grandmother good, it stood to reason that was what it was."

I interrupted her. "What do you mean, he hated telling you?"

"Wait and see. He had good reason. It was after Emma and her mother had gone and Frances was resting that they had this talk. When Tom said it could be anyone she liked, Tarsis said it wasn't what she liked but what Tom wanted, and then she said, 'How about that girl Emma?' Tom told her not to be ridiculous but she persisted and at last he said that, well, yes, he supposed so, he would give Emma, only the whole thing was absurd. The fact was that he'd give anyone to save Frances's life if it were possible to do that, so of course, yes, he'd give Emma."

"It must have put him off this Davina Tarsis, surely?"

"You'd think so. I'm not sure. All this was about nine or ten months ago. Frances started to get better. Oh yes, she did. You needn't look like that. It was just an amazing thing. The doctors were amazed. But it wasn't unheard-of, it wasn't a miracle, though people said it was. Presumably, the chemo worked. All the things that should get right got right. I mean, her blood count got to be normal, she put on weight, the pain went, the tumours shrivelled up. She simply got a bit better every day. It wasn't a remission, it was a recovery."

"Tom must have been over the moon," I said.

Penelope made a face. "He was. For a while. And then Emma died."

"What?"

"In a road crash. She died."

"You're not saying this witch woman, this Davina Tarsis . . . ?"

"No, I'm not. Of course I'm not. At the time of the crash, Tarsis and Tom were together in Tom's house with Frances. Besides, there was no mystery about the accident. It *was* indisputably an accident. Emma was on a school bus coming back from a visit with the rest of her class to some stately home. There was ice on the road, the bus skidded and overturned, and three of the pupils

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were killed, Emma among them. You must have read about it, it was all over the media."

"I think I did," I said. "I can't remember."

"It affected Tom—well, profoundly. I don't mean in the way the death of a grandchild would affect any grandparent. I mean he was racked with guilt. He had such faith in Tarsis that he really believed he'd done it. He believed he'd given Emma's life in exchange for Frances's. And another awful thing was that his love for Frances simply vanished, all that great love, that amazing devotion that was an example to us all really, it disappeared. He came to dislike her. He told me it wasn't that he had no feeling for her anymore, he actively disliked her.

"So there was nothing for him to live for. He believed he'd ruined his own life and ruined his daughter's and destroyed his love for Frances. One night, after Frances was asleep, he drank a whole bottle of liquid morphia she'd had prescribed but hadn't used, and twenty paracetomol and a few brandies. He died quite quickly, I believe."

"That's terrible," I said. "The most awful tragedy. I'd no idea. And poor Frances. One's heart goes out to Frances."

Penelope looked at me and took another cigarette. "Don't feel too sorry for her," she said. "She's as fit as a fiddle now and about to start a new life. Her GP lost his wife about the time he diagnosed her cancer and he and Frances are getting married next month. So you could say that all's well that ends well."

"I wouldn't go as far as that," I said. ●

And Many Happy Returns, Mr. Holmes!

Most people who have read the Sherlock Holmes stories will recall that their creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, tried to end his illustrious character's adventures by killing him off in the story "The Final Problem," in which Holmes meets up with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, at Reichenbach Falls. So great was the public outcry at this apparent conclusion to the Sherlock Holmes tales that Doyle was forced to resurrect his sleuth; Holmes soon appeared in another case—the fall from the precipitous heights of Reichenbach evidently not fatal, after all.

It wasn't only readers of Doyle's own time who refused to accept that Sherlock Holmes should ever die. According to the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, the Baker Street Irregulars, Holmes is *still* alive and well. (He is 147 years old, they assert, retired, and living in Sussex.) They will meet on Twelfth Night, as they do every year, to celebrate his birthday. It has become our custom to join them, in spirit, by providing attendees with complimentary copies of this special Holmes issue. With our Holmes cover, two Holmes cartoons, and Arthur Porges's delightful parody (see p. 94), we aim not only to entertain but to add to the fictional sleuth's extraordinary longevity. For, as long as talented authors, cartoonists, and artists are inspired by him, he will surely never die.

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Saturday Night Special

by Ray Nayler

It was ten minutes past closing time at the roller rink. The rental skates were neatly lined up in their pigeonholes. The scarred wood oval of the rink was empty. All of the skaters had gone, except one kid rattling the buttons of the Pinbot pinball machine by the skate-rental counter. Francis took off his hair net and walked over to the kid.

"Hey."

The kid turned and missed a hit with the flippers. His ball went down.

"Damn. You made me lose my ball, man."

"It'th clothing time."

"What?" The kid had red hair and a round face with freckles across the nose and forehead. "What was that?" He put his hand up to his ear. He had a big, sharp grin on his face. He was missing a tooth.

"It'th clothing time."

The kid gave a sharp bark of laughter. His skates were hanging around his neck. He spun one of the wheels. "Okay, fag. Whatever you say, faggot. Here I go."

Francis stood with his fists clenched and watched him. The kid turned as he reached the door.

"Quit looking at my butt!"

He ran out. Francis locked the doors. Alice, the figure-skating teacher, was sitting on one of the benches at the front of the rink.

Ray Nayler was born in Quebec, Canada and raised in California. Over the last few years he's had stories published in a variety of literary magazines, including *Onionhead Literary Quarterly* and the *Berkeley Fiction Review*. He has been slowly making his way into the mystery genre, too, with tales in recent issues of *Hardboiled* and *The Edge*. We hope Mr. Nayler will continue to write mysteries; he tells us he's just finished his first detective novel. We'll look for it! †

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He tried not to look at her. Maybe she hadn't heard the kid. She acted like she hadn't. She was lacing up her skates carefully. The skin on her smooth-shaved legs looked like plastic. It reflected the fluorescent lights.

Francis opened the janitor's closet and took out the mop. He filled its bucket in the sink. The lights went down, and the disco ball flashed shards of color.

Alice stood in the center of the rink, head down, her chin touching her chest, arms out stiffly at her sides, fingers splayed. The opening bars of "Lean on Me" crackled out of the PA system. She began skating backwards.

Alice reminded herself to smile. The judges let you have it if you didn't show them some teeth. And besides, Mrs. Jennings had paid a thousand dollars to help Alice have her teeth professionally whitened. It was so good of her.

She lifted a leg, stretched her arms out like wings, turned. Her skate rotated on the boards like a screw. Now going forward, she sped up gracefully and jumped. She threw her leg out awkwardly in midair and crashed to the boards on her butt. Her mouth opened in pain.

Francis looked away. Alice fell a lot, but it was all a part of practicing. She was a very good skater—the best in the Tri-City area, and one of the top twenty in the state. Along the front wall, by the ticket booth, was a glass case full of her trophies and a picture of her skating in a pink sequined outfit that Mrs. Jennings, who owned the rink, had made for her. There was another picture of her holding a trophy and crying, and her mascara was running down her cheeks. He liked that picture the best, because he had never seen her face when she was crying.

A pair of her skates, bronzed, sat under the picture.

Alice was sixteen. Mrs. Jennings called her her "jewel" and treated her as if she were her own daughter. Francis thought of the two of them out in the parking lot on long afternoons, Mrs. Jennings making hand motions, smoking Pall Mall after Pall Mall, and Alice with her white polished skates around her neck, nodding and squinting in the sun.

Francis loved Alice desperately, and he kept a newspaper clipping detailing her skating career in a cigar box next to his bed. He was seventeen. They would have gone to the same high school in Hayward, but Alice was in home school. She was very serious about her skating. She came in every day before the rink opened, went home in the afternoon, and then came back to teach her evening class. She always skated all the way through the last three-hour skate, tracing figure eights forward and backward in the center of the rink while the others went around her. After the

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rink closed, she practiced her routine while Francis cleaned up in concessions.

He ran the mop over the floor and thought about the kid at the pinball machine. It was always kids like that that said things to him. It seemed like he knew when someone was going to say something. It was something in their body language or the way they dressed. You could just tell the bastards from the rest of the people.

Alice leaned over the green shag of the rail. Francis could hear her panting over the throb of "Lean on Me." He could feel her there behind him, but he pretended not to notice her. He ran the gray tendrils of the mop over the cracked tile, pushed it into the dirt under the hot-dog machine.

Alice thumped the toe of her skate against the guard rail.

"Hey."

Francis kept on mopping. He didn't know why he was ignoring her.

"Hey, Francis."

He lifted the soaking mop into its bucket, leaned the handle against the wall, and turned.

"Yeah?"

He never said yes. It came out "yeth." His speech therapist told him it would go away. They were working on it one hour every Wednesday.

Alice reached her hand over the rail and said "gimme" with her fingers.

Francis noted that the pale undersides of her arms were flushed red as her cheeks. She had a down-pointing red triangle on her forehead, too. She picked up one foot and let it drop again, like a pony pawing the ground.

"Can you get me a glass of water? I'm dying." She dropped her head and looked at him through her painted lashes. "Please?"

He imagined himself grabbing ahold of her by her arms, kissing her. He felt his cheeks burning. He took a cup from the cabinet and filled it with water. She skated a small circle, changing directions. She came back and flung herself into a sitting position atop the guard wall. She snatched the cup from his hand.

"Thanks."

"Yeah."

He picked up the mop bucket and went out the greasy front door of the rink. The outside air bit cold into the flesh of his arms. His breath clouded and broke apart.

He walked a few paces into the parking lot and upended the bucket. Black water splashed steaming on the pavement. He let the bucket clatter to the ground and crossed his arms against the cold, not wanting to go back inside. Why was he angry with her?

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He could not tell. She had done nothing to him. She had never been cruel to him. She didn't even seem to notice him, really. Maybe that was it. She made him feel invisible.

There was a car parked at the far end of the parking lot. A station wagon with peeling fake wood on its sides. He recognized it—it belonged to the father of one of the girls in Alice's figure-skating class. A little blond girl who had neon-green skates. Her father was tall and thin and wore glasses. He always stayed and watched the class. Sometimes he sat in the concessions area at one of the tables, and he took his glasses off a lot and cleaned them. Francis didn't like the way he looked at Alice. He always made some excuse to talk to her. What was his name? His daughter wasn't a very good skater. She cried when she fell, and once she'd sat out half the class, pouting. She didn't seem to like being in the class very much—it seemed like her father made her go.

What was his car doing there?

He saw movement in it.

Not knowing why, he picked up the bucket and walked back inside as if he had not seen anything.

Alice was in the middle of the rink again, the same as she had been before. The music started up. She skated backwards, turned, picked up speed.

You never knew what they were going to judge you on. Mrs. Jennings told Alice a story once about a male judge who had knocked half a point off of a girl's score because he didn't like the color of her outfit. He thought that only whores wore red. The girl lost the contest. And there was a judge who knocked a point off of a girl's score because she waved with her whole arm, instead of rotating her hand only.

This time, she made her jump perfectly and landed gracefully, one leg out and parallel to the top of the guard-wall. She went past Francis, not seeing him, a small smile of triumph on her face. She did not see him smiling at her, his hands up as if about to clap, the bucket dangling loosely from his elbow.

His face felt greasy. He went into the bathroom. Under the bright fluorescents, his face looked long, pale, and pitted. An angry red blotch stood out on his cheek. The butter and grease didn't help his complexion any. He splashed cold water on his face, shaking. His black hair hung down over his forehead in thick ropes, full of oil. He wondered if the car was still there. Maybe it had left, and that would be the end of it. The end of what? He found himself thinking about the bus.

When Francis was twelve, he had stepped in front of a city bus. He had been walking with his best friend, Andy, and in the bright sunlight he did not see the bus bearing down on him. Andy had grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back at the last second.

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The bus's side mirror clipped Francis's forehead. He collapsed on the spot. The paramedics came and revived him with smelling salts. He was taken to the hospital, but the doctors could not find anything wrong with him. But after that, he lisped. And sometimes he would remember the sound of the bus, and wake up at night with his blanket stuffed in his mouth. Andy's mother died a few weeks later of a liver hemorrhage, and Andy moved away to a foster home. He wrote a letter to Francis, but Francis threw it away without reading it.

Why was he thinking of the bus now?

There was a small window in the bathroom covered in wire mesh that overlooked the parking lot. He stood on top of a garbage can and looked out of it. The car was still there, its windows fogged up in the cold. It was about halfway across the lot. At the very end of the lot was the boulevard and the bus stop. If that man wanted to try anything, he was in a good place. Francis thought of the way the man looked at Alice all the time. He had already picked his daughter up and driven away. Francis remembered the car pulling out of the lot and the girl with the neon-green skates turning to wave to another girl. Francis had been sweeping the parking lot. The sun had been going down. That was hours ago, before the last skate of the night.

Suddenly Francis knew: The man was going to try to rape Alice.

Francis snapped the mop handle in half. He swung the broken-off top half against the wall and the CRACK! echoed off the tile.

He hid the bottom end of the broken mop and the bucket in one of the stalls. He slid the broken top end of the mop up his sleeve.

Behind the concessions counter he disassembled the butter pump. He had already cleaned it once that night, but Alice wouldn't know that. He slid the broken piece of mop handle out of his sleeve and put it under the counter, out of sight. He began methodically running the sponge over the pieces of the butter pump. After that, he opened up the hot-dog machine and pretended to clean it again, killing time.

Finally Alice skated off and sat down on a bench. She began taking off her skates, flushed, out of breath. The muscles of her thighs stood out under her smooth, gleaming skin. Francis glanced at his watch. It was 12:05. They usually took the 12:12 bus home together. They didn't sit together. She sat up front and talked to the driver. The driver was a friend of hers, Francis guessed. Once it had been a different driver, and she had sat next to Francis in the back. He'd stared out the window the whole time. He remembered his heart beating and the way that her hair smelled.

But they weren't going to take the bus together tonight.

She slipped her street shoes on and swung into her pink overcoat with white fake fur at the collar. She came over to him, carry-

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ing her skates with their laces looped together, dangling from her hand.

"Ready to go? We might miss the bus."

He held up the cleaning rag. "I'm not quite done. I'm going to have to take the nextht one."

He must have said it oddly, because she gave him a funny look. "The next one doesn't come for an hour."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm lagging behind tonight."

She shrugged and swung the skates around her neck. "Okay."

It hurt him that she didn't seem more disappointed. He watched the back of her head go out the door. He counted to ten before reaching down and picking up the broken mop handle. He walked to the door, staying near the wall, and peered out through a corner of the glass, trying to stay hidden from view.

If the man saw him watching, he wouldn't try anything. And that would ruin everything.

Alice was halfway across the parking lot. She walked with her head up and her hair shone yellow as she passed under a street lamp.

That morning, when Alice had been leaving her house for practice, her mother's boyfriend had come into the kitchen and grabbed her arm. His eyes were empty, lifeless. But he had been smiling so wide that Alice could see one of his mossy molars on the left side.

"You gonna kiss me goodbye?"

Alice hit him in the face with her empty cereal bowl. Outside, she considered kicking his motorcycle over. Instead she walked to the bus stop. A cat followed her part of the way—it was white and had ear mites.

Alice didn't want to go home. Despite the cold, she walked across the parking lot slowly. Maybe she should miss this bus, go home on the next one with Francis. No . . . she kept walking.

The car was still there. Francis didn't know if it was his imagination or if the car seemed empty now. She crossed through a pool of light and was in the shadows again, very near the car. Francis could feel the cold air leaking in from outside under the door. He tried to hear her footsteps, but could not.

Alice was crossing in front of the car. A dark shape came from behind it, a tall thin shadow, and stood in front of her. She stopped, took two steps back, but before she could run the shape grabbed her. She was shaking her head from side to side. Francis went through the door quickly, but being sure not to make any noise. He moved left into the shadows and let the door fall shut behind him. There was a light out to the left, and he would maybe

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be able to sneak up on them without being seen. He moved quickly. Out on the boulevard a pack of cars went by, gears shifting, covering any sound that Francis's rubber shoes might have made on the concrete.

The man was standing with his back to Francis, talking to Alice. He had a parka wrapped around his right arm. His other hand was around Alice's wrist. Her face was white. She did not see Francis. He saw her mouth form the word "okay" over and over again. Francis gripped the broken mop handle in his hand. He was twenty feet away. *Maybe he has a gun under the parka,* Francis thought. *Or a knife. Or he might be bluffing.*

The man pulled on Alice's arm, yanking her around to the passenger side of the car. Alice opened the door with shaking hands. She made a move like she was going to run, and the man shoved her hard into the car. Francis heard her head hit the metal of the door frame. She sobbed. The man slammed her door shut and went around to the other side.

Now! Francis rushed forward, the mop handle high in the air over his head. The man stopped and spun around. His face had an odd look on it—not fear, or surprise. It was almost . . . blank. Francis could not see the man's eyes. The thick lenses of the man's glasses reflected the streetlight like two yellow flying saucers.

Francis brought the mop handle down in a diagonal chop, hitting the man in the face. He felt the blow vibrate all the way up his arm.

The glasses flew off. Behind them the man's eyes were blue and splashed with blood. There was a CRACK! and the parka on the man's arm burst, throwing white goose down and blue smoke into the air. The man's mouth was open, but he made no sound. He stumbled backwards.

Francis tried to swing at him again.

For some reason his arm would not move. He felt a sharp stab of pain in his chest. His legs gave out, and he went down on the pavement. He saw the parka fall to the pavement too, with the hole in it. Something clattered onto the ground.

A small gun. It looked like a toy. Goose down settled around it like snow. *It's cold enough to snow, anyway,* Francis thought.

The car door opened and there was the sound of feet, running away. He heard a roar and looked up at the station wagon, heading out of the parking lot. It jumped onto the boulevard, bottoming out hard and spitting sparks, its tires squealing.

Francis put his hand to his chest. It came away deep red—so dark it was almost black.

"Francis!"

Alice's face drifted into view. She was leaning down over him.

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Still, she seemed very far away. Her mascara was running, and her eyes sparkled wet, like the photograph in the trophy case.

"Francis, oh my God . . . if you hadn't come he might have . . . he was going to hurt me, Francis."

And I saved you, he thought. *You'll never be able to forget that.* He smiled at her and held out his hand. He saw her teeth press into her lip. His hand was crimson. She backed away.

"You've been shot. I'll . . . I'll call an ambulance. Don't . . . don't move."

He didn't feel like he would be able to move anyway. He couldn't even turn and watch her go. He wanted to see her running—running to save him. But he couldn't turn his head.

Inside the rink, Alice's fingers fumbled, and she had to dial 911 four times before she finally got it right. When the voice came on the other end she started to cry again, thinking of Francis out in the cold, shot, maybe dying. If he had not come at the right time . . . at just that moment . . .

She could still feel the freezing pressure of the man's fingers on her wrist.

Francis just lay there, staring at the little gun. It looked like a toy gun. It was almost funny. He laid his head down beside it and listened to the cars passing on the street. Very far off, he heard the sound of sirens, screaming in the night. The sound grew louder and louder, but it seemed unimportant. Francis just wished that Alice would come back, so they could be together.

He had saved her.

Blue and red and white flashed across his face. The sirens wailed and died. Boots scrambled around him. Noise, noise. She must be out there again, telling them what he had done.

He was her hero.

He would have looked for her, but he could not move. ●

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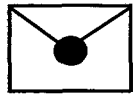

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Art by Allen Davis

HIT-AND-MRS.

by Neil Schofield

As she threw Bernie's suit, fresh in its plastic dry cleaner's cover, onto the backseat of the car, Lou promised herself grimly that this was the last time. She would Do it this time and then Bernie was definitely going to have to pull himself together and take over again. She couldn't go on like this. She checked herself in the mirror. Well, all right, she was still pretty, give you that, but there were shadows under her large eyes, and her mouth was tense. She was exhausted, running about like this *and* trying to run her life at the same time. What's more, Mr. Butteriss was going to rumble them sooner or later. She started the car viciously and headed towards the river. She would cross Battersea Bridge and go on to St. John's Wood in the north of London.

The act of driving calmed her a little. Of course, it hadn't *all* been Bernie's fault. He couldn't help getting flu two weeks ago. But he had resolutely refused to go get vaccinated, when everybody knew you should. The doctor, when he had finally come, had brought no comfort either. Aspirin for the temperature, keep warm, rest, and take plenty of liquids, he had said. Well, everyone knew that.

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After the doctor had gone, she had looked at Bernie, propped up against the pillows, his large face streaked with sweat, his vest stained dark under the armpits, and had to admit that he didn't look good. She straightened the blankets and the coverlet.

"You don't look good, Bernie," she said. "In fact, you look terrible."

"That's nothing to the way I feel," he gasped. She gazed at him with some sympathy, but not much. She felt his forehead. It was burning. She brushed his thick black hair back over his head and kissed him gently on his brow.

A British author who lives in France, Neil Schofield spent most of his working life as a writer for business, his projects including everything from videos to corporate events. It was only a year or so ago that he first tried his hand at fiction—and began producing his sophisticated, witty tales. If he goes on as he's started, Mr. Schofield may soon become one of the field's leading writers. We'll have more of his stories later this year. †

"Don't you go getting this bastard," Bernie said. "One of us is enough."

She wouldn't. She never got anything, worse luck. She could have done with a couple of days in bed herself. She closed the bedroom door and went out to the kitchen to boil up another panful of the herbal mixture that she was feeding Bernie much against his wishes. While it simmered, she opened the window to let some air in.

She took a mug of herbal tea into the bedroom and wrinkled her nose at the smell of the place. She would have to air this room, flu or no flu. Bernie sipped the tea and made a face.

"Muck," he said.

"It's good for you."

"Listen," he said, "I've got a problem."

"What's that, then?"

"I've got a job to do today."

"Well, you can't," she said, "and that's all there is to it. You can't go gadding out to—where is it?—"

"Hotel in the Strand," he said.

"You can't go running about hotels in the Strand or anywhere in that state. You'll have to tell them. Or I will. I wouldn't mind ringing them up."

Bernie wriggled in the bed. He was frowning. He was worried, she could tell. When he was worried, his hairline, which wasn't all that high anyway, came down and mingled amiably with his eyebrows.

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She gazed at him fondly. Who could resist those doggy eyes and that battered nose? He was just like a big kid sometimes. He had thickened up a lot, but she could still see the face of the twenty-year-old Bernie who had stared at her glassily from the floor of the East London boxing ring. She was in the middle of the front row with her best friend Roz, and he was in the middle of his third and last flooring by Johnny "The Gas Man" Trevor. Roz had known Bernie's manager—or the cretin who pretended to be his manager—and they had gone round to his dressing room. His brain was still bouncing around inside his skull and he had looked at her with that same glassy stare. But she had already fallen for him and that was that. He had worn that same look all through their wedding. And the first thing she had done after their marriage was to put a stop to the boxing. She didn't want to wake up one morning lying next to a vegetable.

And here he was twenty-three years older and still looking at her in exactly that way. Though that could be due to the flu. But you had to love him, you really did.

"Let me ring them, Bernie."

"Problem is," Bernie said, "this is the busy time. No, we got to sort this out on our own."

Lou wondered how it had suddenly become "we."

"Can't it wait until you're a bit better, at least?" she said.

"No." Bernie's face was set. "Time is of the—I dunno, something or other."

"Essence." Lou did a lot of crosswords.

"That's it. Of the essence, is what it is. You got to work out a way to help me, Lou."

She took the empty mug and went out into the kitchen again to think. She had been glad when Bernie left that North London bunch—what was their name, those brothers, an Italian or Maltese name, and she could never remember foreign names. He had been too old for all that sort of game. Enforcing, or whatever they called it. He used to come in some nights—or rather mornings—in such a state: torn clothes, cuts, bruises, and once a vicious slash across one cheek that had needed seventeen stitches.

Secretly, she rather liked the scar. But a man in his forties shouldn't be coming home in that state, whatever the bosses said, Italian or not. She had never been entirely sure why he had split up with the—what *was* their name?—brothers. She knew that relations hadn't been good between Bernie and one of them. She had never liked the look of them, the few times she had seen them in one of their so-called nightclubs. So she was extremely pleased and relieved when a friend of his had put him on to International Removals. They had given him a two-week trial and then took him on permanently. It had been good to see him settled down in a

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good steady job. It was regular work, well paid, and Bernie worked reasonable daylight hours, which gave them much more time together. And the money had given them a much larger flat with a lovely view over Wandsworth Common. But now Bernie seemed genuinely worried. Well, if he was *that* worried, she would have to do what she had to to help him.

She went back into the bedroom and sat down on the bed.

She said, "Listen, I've got the hairdresser's this afternoon and there's the dry cleaning to pick up, and a few other little errands, but maybe I *can* help out."

Bernie looked at her. His face cleared a little.

"You really think so, Lou?"

"Tell me about it and we'll see."

He grinned brilliantly at her.

"Pure gold, you are, Lou. Sound as a pound." He reached out and patted her thigh. She looked at his hand mock-reprovingly.

"I don't know what you had in mind for that hand, but it's going to have to wait. Now."

And they got down to details.

In the event, Lou had a hell of an afternoon. To begin with, when she got to the hairdresser's in Southampton Row, Jules-Edouard was running half an hour late due to an emergency peroxide job that had been rushed in, and after the girl had washed her hair, Lou sat there for a full twenty minutes with a wet head. Of course, Jules-Edouard had been in a rush and he'd made a total mess of her hair.

When she left the shop she was in a flaming temper which was not improved by the fact that at the dry cleaner's it took an absolute age to find her coat and Bernie's trousers and there was a ticket on the windscreen when she got to the car. She made a quick calculation and decided that she would go straight to the hotel in the Strand which, let's face it, was not that far. She already had one ticket. There was no point in spending hours finding another parking space little more than half a mile away.

She hailed a black cab and was already halfway there when she realised that she still had the dry cleaning with her.

The taxi dropped her right in front of the hotel and she trotted up the stairs. The large reception hall was full of people milling aimlessly about and getting in each other's way. She pushed her way to the lifts and, her first stroke of luck, there was an empty one waiting. She went up alone to the fifth floor. Room 518 was along to the right. She caught her breath and knocked on the door. There was no sound from inside, but then, those doors were practically soundproof. She cursed all dry cleaners, hairdressers, *and* their families and loved ones. If she was too late, Bernie would kill her . . . then the door was opened by a large man with a fleshy

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face. He was wearing a shirt and trousers with bright red braces and she noticed he was in stocking feet. He looked at the plastic-wrapped dry cleaning.

He said, "The wife's out. I'll take that." And before Lou could say anything he had relieved her of her coat and Bernie's trousers. He stepped back and said, "Come in a second."

She followed him into the small entrance hall. He went into the bedroom and threw the dry cleaning on the bed, then went to the dressing table and opened a drawer. Lou, meanwhile, was having a hell of a time getting the automatic out of her bag, because the silencer was too long. But she tugged it out with one final wrench, flipped off the safety and, while he was still rummaging in the drawer, she Did him. Twice, in the left upper back, just as Bernie had instructed her. She was expecting all sorts of things, but all he did was cough throatily, exactly as though he was choking on a sweet, and fell down immediately, not crumpling slowly like in the films, but all of a piece, suddenly, abruptly.

As she stepped across him to retrieve the dry cleaning, she saw that a coin had dropped out of his hand. He had been going to give her a tip.

She took it anyway. Waste not, want not.

As she left, there was no one in the corridor and she had timed it just right because the lift was just arriving. Two swarthy men pushing a large laundry basket emerged, glancing at her incuriously.

She was late getting back to the flat, because she had to do the shopping, and when she finally opened the door, struggling with the dry cleaning, the plastic supermarket bags, her handbag, and everything, she was exhausted.

But before she could even sit down, Bernie's weak voice called out from the bedroom. And so it goes on, she thought wearily.

Bernie was sitting up in bed, his face pale and sweaty.

"Well?" he said. "Everything go all right?"

"No, it damn well didn't," Lou snapped. "Just look what he did with my hair. And I had one hell of a time at Safeway's. Why do they always wait until it's my turn to change the bloody till-roll? And they didn't have any lamb cutlets left, so you're having pork tonight, like it or lump it."

"Lou," he said, pleading.

She blew out a long breath.

"Yes, all right, it was fine."

She told him about the dry cleaning. He liked that bit.

"That's good, that is. Makes you invisible, dry cleaning does. No one ever looks at the face, they look to see what clothes you've had dry-cleaned."

Then she had to go over it all again and tell him every detail.

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She was irritated. It was almost as though he didn't trust her. So, to get her own back, she deliberately didn't tell him about the tip.

Later, she was in the kitchen when the phone rang. She went into the sitting room to get it, but it stopped ringing just as she got to it, which meant Bernie had picked it up.

She had calmed down when she took his tray into the bedroom. She had drunk a nice soothing glass of red wine in the kitchen and she had added a glass to his tray to build his strength up. Bernie looked at her guiltily.

"That was them."

"Who?"

"International Removals."

"That's nice."

"No, it isn't. We got another one tomorrow."

"What?"

"We got to Do another one. Tomorrow. Afternoon. Wimbledon way."

"Oh, *Bernie.*" She very nearly slammed the tray down on the bed. "But didn't you tell them you were ill?"

"No." He was sheepish.

"Bernie, you are a complete idiot."

"I can't tell them that. How would it look? It's the busy season."

"Don't keep saying it's the busy season."

"No need to shout, Lou," he said mildly. "Come on, give us a hand."

"I've already given you a hand," she said firmly, "and you know very well that Wednesday's my Rhythmic Dancing and Bingo with Roz."

"Can't you skip it for once?"

"No, I can't, Bernie. And that's final."

But it wasn't final at all, as she very well knew. And Bernie knew it, too. After a couple of glasses of wine they both knew she'd say yes to anything.

"Trouble is, it means going down to the office," Bernie said later.

"Why's that?"

"To take back the what'sername and collect the doings."

This took some translation and explanation, but what it amounted to was that she found herself the next morning outside the building that contained International Removals. It was alongside the river, a thin, shabby-looking Victorian affair, standing incongruously between bright clean new Rice Krispies boxes housing entire tribes of yuppies or dinkies or whatever they were calling themselves now. It looked like a maiden aunt at a techno rave.

In the lobby she looked at the nameplates. There it was—the sixth floor. All the other firms seemed to be Freight Forwarders. As she went up in the tiny wheezing wooden lift, she wondered

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what a Freight Forwarder did. She repeated the words to herself. No, it didn't make any sense.

International Removals was the only office on the sixth floor and had a plain wooden door with frosted panes. There was a peeling yellow notice uneasily Sellotaped to one of the grimy glass panels. "Ring and Knock," it said, "If No Answer, Leave Message Below."

The was no sign of a bell to Ring, so she Knocked. There was No Answer, so she turned the tarnished brass doorknob and walked in.

The office consisted of one large room, dusty and sparsely furnished. The only real furniture, apart from a couple of chairs and a row of filing cabinets, was a large battered desk. Behind it sat a thin, middle-aged man, wearing a sombre three-piece suit and bifocal spectacles. Like the room and everything else in it, he looked sparse and dusty. On the desk in front of him sat a varnished wooden plaque that read: "Mr. O. Butteriss." Just like in a bank.

He said, "Yes?" and peered over his glasses at her. "What can we do for you, young lady?"

She liked his elegant manner and his gentle, dusty voice, but realised she must look like someone looking for a freight forwarder.

"I'm here on behalf of Bernie—Bernard Woods. I'm Mrs. Woods," she added.

Mr. Butteriss looked at her for a long, worrying moment. She saw that his eyes were like everything else about him, a dusty grey.

"Well," he said, "how very unexpected. May one ask why Mr. Bernard Woods found himself unable to put in an appearance?"

They had discussed this for a long time.

"Migraine," she said. "A migraine. Came on suddenly this morning. He was in agony."

He pursed his lips and nodded judiciously.

"Ah, migraine. Yes, I do know. I myself suffer from the occasional onset."

He considered her again, very intently. Lou could see how many people might find Mr. Butteriss unsettling, frightening even.

"So," he said, "there is nothing for it." He straightened up in his chair. "I do trust, though, that Mr. Woods's migraine will not prevent him from—"

"Oh no," Lou said quickly, "he's already on the mend. He's taken his codeine and everything. He'll be all right for this afternoon." She and Bernie had also talked about this.

"I am much relieved. Well then, you have something for me."

Lou advanced and took from her back the heavy Jiffy bag con-

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taining the what'sername complete with silencer. She placed it on the desk. Mr. Butteriss performed a slight, unimportant gesture, just like one of those close-up conjurors, and the bag was gone.

In return, he handed her three envelopes. One was heavy, and she supposed contained the new what'sername. The second was small and fat and that, she knew, would hold the money. The third was thin and light, and that was the all-important doings. Who, When, and Where.

She gathered them up and put them in her bag. She hesitated.

"Well," she said, "it's been very nice meeting you."

"Yes," Mr. Butteriss said, "hasn't it. Please mention to Mr. Woods—and be good enough to quote me precisely—No Loose Ends."

"I'll be sure to," Lou said, not understanding a word. What was a Loose End when it was at home? Mr. Butteriss did not stand up as she turned to the door.

"Bye," she said.

"Oh, absolutely," said Mr. Butteriss. "Toodle-oo." His grey eyes were watching her as she left.

On the way back to the flat, she bought copies of the national dailies and the early edition of the *Standard.* She sat in a cafe combing through them. There was no mention of a brutal Doing at a West End hotel. Strange.

She mentioned this to Bernie while she was sitting watching him eat his lunch.

"Cleaning Gang," he said.

"Do what?"

"Cleaning Gang. They have cleaning gangs. I Do them, the Cleaning Gang cleans up. It's all specialists, see. Compartmentalised." He also explained Loose Ends. Lou was irritated. If they meant Witnesses, why couldn't they just say Witnesses instead of going all round the houses?

At least, before leaving, she had time to give the flat a bit of a clean—well, a lick and a promise really, but she hoovered and aired the rooms and changed the beds and did a perfunctory dust around. As soon as Bernie was up and around again, she would really give the place a proper going over.

Then she left to go to Wimbledon.

"Got everything?" asked Bernie, looking up from the *Mail.*

"I think so. What do you fancy for supper tonight? Anything special?"

"Bit of cod be nice," he said. "Bit of cod with parsley sauce."

She picked up her bag and the dry cleaning that she was taking along for luck.

The traffic was light, the lunchtime lemming rush being long over, and she had quite an agreeable drive out to Wimbledon,

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where Mr. Ehrenburg lived in a double-fronted red-brick Victorian house on a pleasant, chestnut-lined avenue.

She arrived at four-thirty on the dot. He was alone in the house and he was not expecting her. So that was all right. And there wasn't a Loose End in sight.

She saw no one as she left, except for a British Telecom van which was slowly approaching as she drove away. The driver was as swarthy as his passenger.

"Compartmentalisation," she said, relishing the feel of the word in her mouth. "Nothing like it."

In the next ten days, Lou saw a lot more of the world, and a lot more of Mr. Butteriss, Bernie's virus being apparently of the clinging variety. He seemed to rally several times, then each time suffered a relapse.

The busy season. Tell her about it. She Did an Iranian on the Friday, which totally disrupted her planned weekend shop, and then there was a rush Doing out in Dorking over the weekend. Although she had never been there and much appreciated the breath of fresh country air this allowed her, she did resent the unsocial hours that Bernie had to work sometimes.

On the following Monday it was a Russian, or someone she supposed was a Russian; his breath smelt distinctly of gherkins. And on Tuesday afternoon, there was the Taiwanese at the hotel in Paddington. At least he was said to be a Taiwanese, but Lou thought he looked and spoke like a Scotsman. In fact, he *was* a Scotsman, Mr. Butteriss's normally impeccable intelligence having gone astray. But it was all right because as she Did the putative Taiwanese, he lurched backwards, crashed through the window of his hotel room, and plummeted five floors to the street where he fell right on top of the *real* Taiwanese, who was just returning after a good lunch, and killed him stone dead.

Mr. Butteriss gave her a strange look the following day, as he took the what'sername, and said, "A passable job on the Taiwanese gentleman. But please tell Mr. Woods not to become overfanciful. Simplicity is best. There was an extremely complicated aftermath."

Lou had not understood. As far as she was concerned, she had simply Done the man in room 537. Mr. Butteriss noted her puzzlement and explained the mix-up about hotel-room numbers, which had been entirely due to a breakdown in communications and which would not recur.

Lou and Bernie had decided that the best excuse for Lou going to the office instead of Bernie had been to sell it as a sort of security device. "A cut-out," she had said, "like in the spy books." Mr. Butteriss had immediately seen the sense of it.

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"We should have thought of it ourselves," he said.

In fact, he had unbent a lot since her first visit. Even to the extent of making her a cup of his dusty instant coffee. Now, when she arrived, he would actually stand up and see her to a chair. After the exchange of what'sernames and doings, he would spend ten minutes chatting to her. She appreciated this, since she knew he must be under pressure and everything.

He had explained the busy season to her. It was due to a number of factors. For instance, sometimes in certain organisations there was simply a need for a cull, he said.

"Cutting away dead wood, do you see. Or in other cases it's a simple settling of accounts. Or a way of merely sending a message. There's something about this time of year that makes the blood rise. There's no accounting for it. We just have to cope. And with valued and capable people like Mr. Woods—Bernie—we cope very well." He looked over his glasses at her and smiled.

Lou felt warm and—well, *included.* But she had to gulp her coffee and leave if she was going to get out to Gatwick on time. Mr. Butteriss saw her to the door.

"My warmest regards to Bernie," he said, "and please mention to him—"

"I know," said Lou, "No Loose Ends."

"Precisely," Mr. Butteriss said, smiling his sad smile.

Everything considered, it was an exhausting week, even though she did manage to make the Rhythmic Dancing on Wednesday and won twenty-five pounds at the Bingo. She was heartily relieved when the weekend came and they could go and spend Saturday night and Sunday with her sister in Chigwell. All right, so her brother-in-law, a prosperous betting-shop owner, didn't really get on with Bernie, but what the hell. It was a relief not to have to cook and clean and look after Bernie and then run off and Do somebody. It was a real rest cure. And Bernie really seemed to be on the mend. In fact, come to mention it, a couple of times during the week, she had come in and smelt drink on his breath. So at least he was getting out of the flat, even though it was only down to the pub for a Guinness.

When they arrived home on Sunday night, she felt rested and happy. Then—it was too good to last—the phone rang. And, of course, it was Mr. Butteriss. She held the phone out to Bernie but he whispered hoarsely that he felt a little woozy and went to bed.

She was still a little resentful about that the next morning when she went to International Removals. Mr. Butteriss was, even for him, remarkably grave. He did not offer any coffee but looked at her, tapping his chin with a Manila envelope.

"Tell me," he said. "How does Mr. Woods feel about Women?"

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"Well, I don't really know. All right, I suppose. Normal. Like any other man." Then her brain clicked into "Drive."

"Oh," she said, "you mean about *Doing* women?"

He nodded.

"No problem," she said firmly.

Mr. Butteriss stared out of the grimy window at the grimy river.

"It's got to be done and there's an end to it. But I have to say I hate dealing with these North London people. Gangsters and barbarians to a man."

Lou was about to say that Bernie had once worked for a gang of North London barbarians but thought better of it. It was rude to interrupt and he certainly knew that anyway.

"Extremely distasteful, these personal affairs," said Mr. Butteriss. "Why these people can't keep their womenfolk in order without going to these lengths, I fail to understand. But, wheels within wheels, you understand, favours to be done at a high level. One is powerless, I fear. However, it is messy and far from professional."

He handed over the doings, and spoke as if he were talking to a child.

"Please, Lou, ensure that Bernie understands that No Loose Ends is not just a form of words. It is the way we do business." And he gave her his mournful smile.

In the car she looked in the envelope. St. John's Wood. Well, that wasn't so bad. At least she'd be home early. She wondered what it was like to Do a woman. Did it feel any different? She was going to ask Bernie at lunchtime, but all he said when she told him she had a Do that afternoon was, "That's good."

She was so irritated by this and by the fact that he didn't even offer to do it for her, despite the fact that he was clearly back on his feet again, that she decided not to tell him anything.

And just to underline her irritation, after lunch Bernie put on his jacket, took a bunch of notes from the pay envelope, and announced that he was going to play a little poker that afternoon. To help his morale and complete his recovery, he said.

If she didn't know him better, she would have said he was malingering.

No, she told herself, as she drove past Lord's, this was it. Bernie was going to have to get a grip, convalescence or no convalescence. She was going to put her foot down. It had gone too far. Here she was now on her way to Do a woman. And he hadn't even shown the *slightest* interest.

The Woman in question lived in a large mansion block just off the St. John's Wood Road. Lou parked a street away, took her bag and the dry cleaning, and walked slowly round the block. The

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front door had a security lock, but, efficient as always, Mr. Butteriss had provided the code. There was no porter, just a large, empty, marbled lobby. She headed for the lift.

The way some people live, she thought, as she walked down the corridor on the fourth floor, her shoes sinking into the thick carpet.

At apartment Number 8, she took out the automatic—she had learnt that much since her first time—and concealed it within the dry cleaning. She rang the bell, and an expensive-sounding chime rang inside. After a long moment, the door opened and a blonde with a thin, petulant face and hair in need of a root job peered out. She was wearing what Lou could only describe as next to nothing.

"Yes?" she said.

Lou held out the dry cleaning. The woman's face creased in uncertainty. Then she turned back into the apartment and called out, "Did you—?"

Lou moved quickly, pushed her all the way in and showed her the what'sername. The blonde stared at it for a moment, then, without a word, turned and ran, scrambling, down the hall. Although she was bouncing off the walls, from side to side, like something in a fairground stall, Lou managed quite easily to Do her twice in the left upper back, the way that Bernie had shown her.

She walked down the hall and, without warning, there was a man standing in a bedroom doorway staring first at her, then at the body, then at her again. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. Oh dear. This was what she had always dreaded. A Loose End.

She sighed. There was nothing for it. Mr. Butteriss had been most insistent. No Loose Ends. She could see him saying that, with his odd, sad little smile, as clearly as if he was in front of her.

As a matter of fact, she was suddenly seeing a whole lot of things very clearly. She raised the automatic for the second and last time.

She said, "Hello, Bernie. Mr. Butteriss sends his best. And look, I picked up your suit from the cleaner's."

Leaving, she saw no one, except a Harrods van which pulled into the kerb as she cleared the gate. The swarthy driver and his passenger stared at her as she went over and kicked the driver's door quite viciously, just for the hell of it.

The ache lasted for a long, long time. ●

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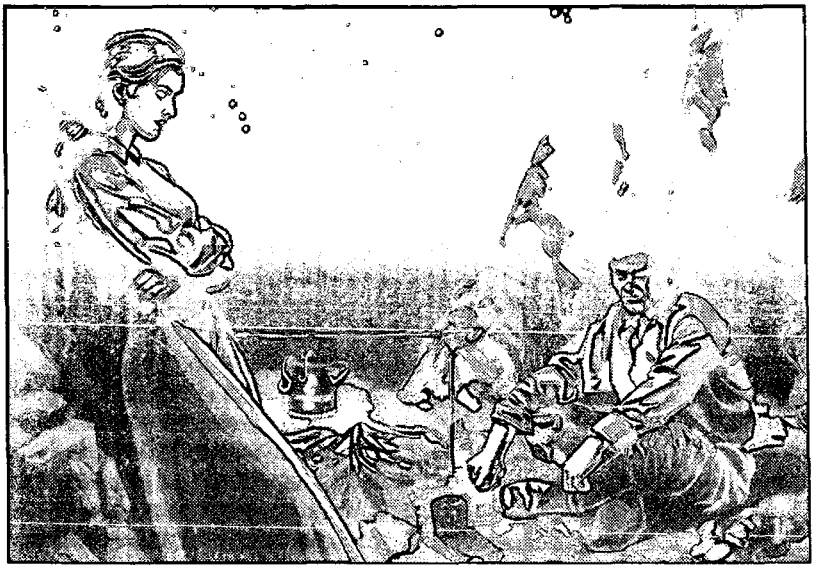

Art by Mark Evans

The Naked Lady of Whispering Gulch

by O'Neil De Noux

The first thing Steve Whitman noticed: There was no Boot Hill outside Whispering Gulch, like back in Tombstone. The second thing he noticed: There were no people on the street, not that the dirt road running down the center of the unpainted wooden town was much of a street. The third thing he noticed: The place smelled like wet dirt, like mud, only it was as dry as the rocky desert surrounding the town.

The roan mare Whitman had bought in Tombstone slowed her pace and veered to the left, to a water trough in front of a gray wooden building with a worn red sign out front that read "Whispering G Saloon."

Whitman climbed off the mare, without falling this time, and stretched. Tall and thin, six-three to be exact, Whitman had sand-colored hair and sunken cheeks that gave him a gaunt look. He

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liked that. He fancied it made him look tough. After all, he was a Pinkerton man.

A yellow dog trotted up and sniffed the air near Whitman. He shooed the dog, but it didn't move. It snapped its jaws at him and stood its ground. Whitman watched the dog as he tied the mare to a hitching post and went into the saloon. The mare whinnied; she didn't seem to like the dog much.

The saloon was dark and stuffy and smelled of stale beer and tobacco. Whitman pulled off the new black Stetson he'd bought in Tombstone and wiped his brow and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. The bar was to his left. The mirror behind the long bar was broken. Dusty bottles were lined up in front of it.

Whitman took a hesitant step forward and jumped when a voice said, "What you lookin' for?"

He squinted and spotted a fat man sitting at one of the small wooden tables along the right side of the saloon. The man was cleaning shot glasses with a rag.

"Howdy," Whitman said, and worried immediately that he might not have bought the right clothes in Tombstone—a rough brown cotton shirt, stiff Levi's, chaparajos leggings, and black boots. He took another step forward, his spurs clinking on the rough floorboards.

Whitman cleared his mind and said, "I'm looking for whoever handles the mail here."

The man looked at Whitman as if he were in pain.

"I'm looking for the postman. Whoever delivers the mail here."

The man spit a stream of brown saliva on the floor. He wiped his right arm across his mouth. Whitman stepped up to the table.

"Stagecoach brings the mail every Monday from Tombstone. I hold it out back. You 'specting some mail, mister?"

"No." Whitman reached into the top pocket of his shirt and pulled out a photograph. "I'm looking for a woman."

"Who ain't?" The man spat again, closer to Whitman's boots. A small cloud of dust rose from the floor where the spit landed.

"Her name is Karen Duncan. She wrote to her father from here several times since 'eighty-nine." Whitman held the photo out for the man to see. The man narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

O'Neil De Noux is the author of a contemporary New Orleans police series. He's contrived a tale with a historical setting for us this time out, however, and New Orleans only enters the story as backdrop to the mystery, rather than as the setting. Mr. De Noux's latest book is a collection entitled *LaStanza: New Orleans Police Stories* (Pontalba/'99). One of the tales was recently filmed for New Orleans television's Short Story Theatre. †

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"Ain't no woman that pretty round Whispering Gulch." The man patted his greasy black hair and ran his fingers over his handlebar moustache, then shrugged and went back to cleaning the glasses.

"Have you received any mail from New Orleans for Karen Duncan?"

"I been handlin' the mail for 'bout three months. The barber used to handle it, but his horse fell on him and he died."

The man leaned forward and looked Whitman up and down and said, "That where you're from. New Orleans?"

"I'm a Pinkerton man."

"A what?"

"An operative. A private detective. I was hired to find this woman."

Whitman shoved the picture back in his pocket. He jumped again when another voice called out from the back of the saloon.

"Is she a blond-headed woman?"

Whitman nodded and looked hard, but couldn't see who was there.

"Maybe she's the nekked lady."

He still couldn't see who was talking and turned back to the man shining the glasses, who seemed angry. Jutting his chin toward Whitman, he said, "This Karen woman. She a sportin' woman?"

Whitman shrugged. He wished he'd hired an interpreter back in El Paso.

"She a whore?"

"No. Her father's a very wealthy man."

The voice from the back said, "She *could* be the nekked lady. Let me see that picture."

Whitman took a few steps toward the back, and pulled out the photo. A dusty, spindly old man stepped out of the darkness. White hair like a spider's web, a craggy face, and hunched over, the old man smiled at Whitman and said his name was Butch Johns.

"That fat cuss over there is Dickie Young."

The old man held out a wiry arm marked with brown age spots. Whitman passed him the picture, then pulled his credentials out of the back pocket of his trousers and showed them to Butch.

The old man glanced at the credentials and shrugged and looked back at the photo of Karen Duncan. He rubbed the white stubble on his chin. "She's awful young, ain't she?"

"That was taken back in 'eighty-five. She was seventeen then."

The old man held the photo at arm's length and said, "This *could* be the nekked lady."

"How ya' gonna tell?" Young said. "Can't get close enough to her.

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Lessen this pilgrim done brought some spyglasses. You brought spyglasses, mister?"

Whitman shook his head and took the photo back from Butch. He cleared his throat and asked what they meant by the "nekked" lady.

Butch told him to sit and pulled a chair up at the same small table and told him how every other Saturday, just before sundown, a blond woman came to the San Pedro River and bathed.

"She's blond and pretty as the day is long. We go out to watch her, but we stay on the other side of the river so as not to spook her."

"We scare her off," Young added behind them, "she'll never come back. I keep tellin' that old fool."

Butch cackled and slapped Whitman's hand. "I tried to follow her once, but she lost me in the boulders headin' south."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Near a year now," Young said behind them. "It were Saturday, the first of June, eighteen eighty-nine. That's my birthday. That's how I remember."

"Wait—this woman's been bathing in this river every Saturday for a year?"

"Every *other* Saturday," Butch said. "Hell, a woman's gotta bathe, lessen she wants to smell like old Young over there."

Whitman pulled the portrait of Karen Duncan out and looked at it again. He'd studied it so many times since Mr. Pinkerton gave it to him—sitting in his big office with his friend, Chief of Police David Hennessey—that he had it memorized. Sometimes, on the train, he would close his eyes and see Karen's face, the wide eyes, the small nose, the delicate lips, the wispy blond hair on her shoulders.

He took out his notepad and started to write, when it occurred to him that *this* was Saturday.

He looked up at Butch and said, "Is this the right Saturday?"

The old man nodded so hard, Whitman thought his head might pop off.

Whitman felt a flush of heat and took off his hat to fan himself. Butch smiled, and he saw several teeth were missing from the old man's mouth. A gleam came to Butch's eyes as he said, "Wait till you see her. She's . . . she's beautiful."

About a mile out of town, Whitman spotted the same yellow dog. When the roan mare whinnied again, he pointed the dog out to Butch, who laughed.

Dickie Young turned around in his saddle and spat again and said, "You sure are stupid. That ain't no dog. That's a coyote."

Butch told him to look at the orange behind the ears, not to

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mention the thin snout and wily eyes. Whitman said nothing. He just followed the ass of the squat pinto Young rode.

The sun was low in the sky when they stopped and tied their horses to some mesquite bushes.

"Watch those thorns," Butch warned Whitman, but it was too late. He'd stuck his left thumb and it bled.

Young led the way through more boulders down a winding trail to what looked like a low cliff. The big man went down on his belly and crawled between two large boulders to the cliff's edge. Without looking back, he waved them forward. Butch scurried over to lie next to Young, leaving barely enough room for Whitman to squeeze in.

A small brown river lay about thirty feet below them, the sun glimmering silver off it. Whitman shaded his eyes with his hand and saw her. She stood directly across the river on the far bank. A large brown horse drank from the river as the woman took the dark ribbon from her blond hair and shook her hair out. She put the ribbon on a boulder next to the water and unbuttoned her dress all the way down.

Butch chuckled and elbowed Whitman in the ribs.

Young growled for them to keep quiet.

Whitman watched the woman climb out of her dress and pull her petticoat over her head. She wiggled out of her chemise and took off her corset. It took forever for her to unlace her corset.

She stood naked at the water's edge, stretched, and then walked into the slow-moving river. Whitman was sure everyone could hear his heartbeat. He heard it thundering in his ears. Perspiration worked its way down both sides of his face now as the woman sank up to the neck in the brown water.

The woman moved slowly in the water, her arms outstretched. Nearing their side of the river, she rose from the water to waist-level and pulled her hair away from her face, turned and went back in.

At this distance Whitman couldn't be sure, but she looked like the picture of Karen Duncan. If he only had brought binoculars. He might even be able to see her appendectomy scar. No scar—no Karen Duncan.

When he let out a deep breath, both men turned to him. Until then, he hadn't realized he was holding his breath.

Twice the woman climbed out on the far bank and faced the sun, letting the water run from her arms and legs before going in again. Butch was right. She was beautiful. Whitman felt his pulse in his temples and his throat was parched.

Darkness closed in quickly and Whitman strained to see the woman. Something struck his back and he instinctively brushed it away. Another strike on his back made him turn and a huge drop

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of rain hit him square in the face. The darkness wasn't sunset. Thick gray clouds had formed overhead and the rain slammed down on them in a great torrent.

Not unlike a semitropical New Orleans rainstorm, the rain pelted them with large drops, raising clouds of dust into the air. Whitman looked back down at the woman and she was out on the far bank, her face skyward, her mouth open.

A sliver of sunlight cut through the clouds and illuminated the naked lady, making her glow momentarily, all blond hair and white skin. She slipped back into the water and floated on her back.

Then, as if a heavenly bucket had been dumped on them, a rush of rain came down in a deluge and Whitman tried to get up but slipped. He saw Butch and Young crawling away from the cliff. He tried to follow, slipped again, and slid all the way over the cliff. The earth fell away from him and he plummeted down. He felt himself strike the riverbank and slide more and then he sank into the water.

He screamed and reached for air and felt himself twisting and turning and twisting again. He swallowed water and everything went black.

Something flickered in front of Whitman. He opened his eyes slowly and saw it was a fire. Pulling himself up, he looked up at the black sky and then at the outline of boulders beyond the fire. He turned to his right and she was leaning against a boulder, a metal cup in her hand.

She took a drink and said, "Coffee's on the fire."

Dressed now, her long hair tied back with a ribbon, the firelight dancing across her face, flickering long shadows on the rocks behind her.

Whitman sat up and felt the wetness still in his shirt and trousers. His back ached and his arms were sore. He ran his hand over his chin and brushed dirt off.

"Where's my gun?" His hand automatically patted his right side. His chaparajos were gone, too.

"What?" The woman laughed. "You're lucky you still got your blue jeans. Hell, you should be dead. It hasn't rained like that around here in years. Maybe never. If you hadn't fallen near me, you woulda been dead." Her voice had an edge to it.

"You . . . you pulled me out?"

"Didn't have much of a choice, did I? Did you enjoy watching me?" She sounded angry, yet there was a softness to her voice, like she was teasing him.

"Yeah," Whitman said as he tried to stand up. He patted his shirt pocket, reached in, but the picture was gone.

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"At least you're honest." She threw her coffee on the ground and stepped toward the fire.

Whitman stood on shaky legs, wiping the dirt from his palms onto his shirt. When she looked at him again, he asked if she'd seen two other men.

"There were three of you?"

"They've been watching you for months."

She nodded. "I suspected as much." She put a hand on her hip and looked hard at him. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Whispering Gulch."

She shook her head. "No. Before. You're not from these parts."

"I'm from New Orleans." Whitman reached into his back pocket and pulled out the soggy credentials. "I'm a Pinkerton man. I've been hired to find a woman named Karen Duncan."

The woman smiled at him.

"Are you Karen Duncan?"

"Why you lookin' for her?"

"Well, you see, her father died. She's inherited a bunch of money. In New Orleans. Karen Duncan is a very wealthy woman." He watched her face, to see if it revealed anything. But she stepped back, away from the fire into the flickering shadows.

"Are you Karen Duncan?" Whitman took a hesitant step toward the fire. His legs were so weary, each movement hurt.

"Who else would recognize Karen Duncan back in New Orleans?"

He shrugged. "She had two aunts, but they're dead, too. The lawyers might recognize her. The doctor who took out her appendix would recognize her, if he hadn't died last year."

The woman stepped forward again. She sat on a rock next to the fire and let out a long sigh and said, "We buried Karen Duncan last spring in Nogales."

Whitman took another painful step forward and realized what the woman had said. "She's . . . dead?"

"Was when we buried her."

"But . . . but how?"

The woman reached for the blue enameled coffeepot next to the fire and refilled her cup. "She got sickly and died." The woman poured coffee into a cup and perched it on a rock closer to Whitman. "It's a hard life out here for a whore, mister."

Whitman felt dizzy. He went down on his knees next to the fire and fell back on his haunches.

The woman passed his cup to him and he sipped the strong, bitter coffee. Whitman heard things moving in the darkness beyond the firelight. Something scurried along the ground. Wings flapped overhead.

He sipped the coffee and the woman told him the sad story of

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Karen Duncan, whom she'd befriended across the border in an adobe town called Naco. Sporting white women with blond hair made better money than most whores, she said. The two sold their favors to whatever vaquero or cowboy didn't take their favors for free, from Tombstone to Nogales.

"Then what's your name?"

"Paula. Paula Lewis. What's yours, Pinky-man?"

"That's 'Pinkerton man.' " Whitman sat back and told her his name. The coffee warmed him and he heard the flap of wings again and a breath of dry desert air passed over them, fanning the fire. Paula stoked the fire with a stick.

"How much money would Karen have inherited?"

"Plenty." Whitman saw this wasn't a good enough answer, so he added quickly, "They didn't tell me exactly how much, but it's a lot. A whole lot, including a mansion on St. Charles Avenue."

Paula leaned toward Whitman and said, "Did you see the scar on my hip from where the doctor took out my appendix?"

He shook his head.

"You saw everything else, didn't you?" Her voice teased him now.

Whitman felt his neck grow hot.

"Those lawyers back in New Orleans. They older men?"

Whitman nodded.

Paula smiled and stood up, and to his amazement, started unbuttoning her dress. Whitman took another gulp of coffee and pretended not to watch, but saw every move as the woman removed her dress and petticoat and stood naked, except for her laced boots. No chemise, no corset now.

She put her hands on her hips and rolled her shoulders and said, "I think I can handle those lawyers. What do you think?"

She moved her right hand to her belly and rubbed it lightly and said, "All I need is a little scar here and I'm Karen Duncan. Especially if *you* say so."

Whitman finished his coffee, nearly choking on it as Paula took a step toward him. "How much money you make, Pinky?"

He looked at her body as the firelight streaked her creamy skin with red and orange and yellow.

"How would you like to never have to work again?"

He looked back up at her face and said, "That's 'Pinkerton man.' "

"Well, Mister Pinkerton man, how would you like to be my partner?"

"Huh?"

She stepped closer until she stood over him and leaned her face down toward his. She turned her head to the right, reached around and pulled her hair away, and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was soft and gentle but grew harder and deeper.

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Whitman felt her hand grab his right hand and bring it to her naked breast.

On their way up the steps to the doctor's office along the south side of Tombstone, Whitman grabbed the back of Paula's skirt and said, "Why did you, I mean Karen, get her mail at Whispering Gulch?"

Paula flashed a smile at him and spoke to him as if he were a little boy. "I stayed there awhile and kept going back for my mail until the barber died."

She patted him on the head and said, "Don't worry, Pinky. Leave it all to me." Then she led the way into the doctor's office.

If she'd told him once, she'd told him a dozen times the last few days: That was what she liked best about him—that he let her do the thinking.

Dr. S.C. Lucas was on the light side of seventy. Barely. Small and clean-shaven and balding up front, the good doctor wore spectacles, a white shirt, and pin-striped trousers. He stood as they entered and seemed to brighten when Paula smiled at him.

But his eyes narrowed when she told him she wanted her appendix out, immediately. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but closed it when Paula pulled a large wad of money from her purse and handed it to him.

Whitman wondered how many men it took for her to make that much money. He felt his neck grow red and knew it was jealousy he felt.

"I need my appendix out today," Paula told the doctor. "Right now, if possible."

"But . . ."

She stood and started unbuttoning her dress. Whitman noticed the stuffy room smelled faintly of alcohol. The doctor cleared his throat. Whitman looked out the side window at the rooftop across the street.

The doctor cleared his throat again and said, "Well . . ."

"Now that's better," Paula said, dropping her dress and petticoat in Whitman's lap as she turned and walked over to the bed at the back of the room.

"I . . . I'll need to get some hot water and . . ."

"Take your time," Paula said lightly. "Take your time."

The operation took a lot longer than Whitman thought it would. The doctor used ether on Paula and she looked dead for a while, until near the end of the operation, when the doctor sewed her up. He looked nervous, his hand shaking as he explained he was using catgut thread soaked in gentian. He swathed the incision in white cotton gauze. It was then that Whitman saw Paula's chest rise when she breathed.

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The doctor cleaned her off and went down to the saloon. Whitman pulled a light blanket over her. He pulled a chair up next to the bed and held her hand while she slept. He stared at her face, at the fine lines of her forehead, at her small nose and sculptured lips, at her pointy chin, and the curves of her cheeks. She was so pretty it hurt. He squeezed her hand.

He thought of the nights they'd spent in the desert before coming here, how they'd planned their life in New Orleans. She was so happy. Pulling her long hair back with her hands, she closed her eyes and asked him to tell her about New Orleans.

He told her about the towering oaks with their gray Spanish-moss beards and the dark magnolia trees with their sweet white flowers. He told her about the fine homes along St. Charles Avenue and the lacework wrought-iron balconies and the quaint Creole cottages and fine patios of the old quarter. He told her about sweet pralines and raw oysters and tangy gulf shrimp.

She asked about her father's mansion. She practiced calling the late Mr. Duncan her father. Whitman had passed the Duncan mansion many times. It was an immaculately white Greek Revival home: two stories with eight large columns out front, an ornate overhang over the front gallery, and a wide front lawn.

He noticed she was sweating, so he pulled the blanket off. Later, with the sweat rolling off her face, with her hand too wet to hold, he rushed down for the doctor. The bartender at the Red Dog Saloon said the doctor had left some time ago, to deliver a baby some miles out of town.

Whitman took water up to Paula and wiped her down and fanned her with a flat board he found next to the doctor's desk. He fanned her until his arms could fan no more. He fell into the chair and poured more water over her body.

When the doctor returned, sometime in the evening, Paula was pale and pasty and barely breathing. The doctor worked on her while Whitman collapsed in a corner across the room.

She died before sundown.

Dr. Lucas left to fetch the undertaker.

Whitman went to Paula and picked up her hand; it was cold and clammy now. Kneeling next to her, he buried his face in her hair and smelled the sweet familiar scent of her skin and cried.

Sometime later, someone tried to pull him off. He reached down and hugged her but she felt like a statue now. She was gone. Strong hands pulled him away and he stumbled back across the room and watched the doctor and another man dress her and carry her out.

The doctor said something about Boot Hill, but Whitman shook his head. He tried to say something, but couldn't. He sat back in the corner of the room and buried his face in his hands.

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Whitman woke facedown on the dusty floor. He sat up and wiped the dirt from his face and looked at the empty bed across the room, then slowly stood and walked down the stairs.

He shielded his eyes from the bright sun as he crossed the dirt street. As he passed the front door of the White Hotel, he heard a voice and turned and saw that it came from a woman with long, stringy blond hair who carried a dark-haired child in her arms.

"Um . . . did you say something?" Whitman's voice was scratchy. He wanted to lean against the wooden post supporting the balcony, but inched his legs apart instead and folded his arms for balance.

"Are you the Pinkerton man?" the woman said, her eyes on the ground.

It took a second for the question to register, but Whitman nodded. He saw a Mexican with a sombrero behind the woman now, holding the hand of a little boy. Both had dark hair, like the child in the woman's arms.

The woman shifted the child to her right arm, balancing it on her hip. She studied Whitman momentarily before looking down again and said, "I heard you've been looking for Karen Duncan."

"What?"

"I'm Karen Duncan."

Whitman reached out and grasped the wooden post. He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head.

"What did you say?"

The woman stuck her left hand into a pocket in her dress and pulled out a bundle of letters tied together with a red ribbon. She held them up to Whitman. "I'm Karen Duncan."

Whitman leaned forward to read the top envelope. Postmarked New Orleans, August 11, 1889, the return address was Nathaniel L. Duncan's St. Charles Avenue mansion. The envelope was addressed to Miss Karen Duncan, General Delivery, Whispering Gulch, Arizona Territory.

The woman handed the letters to him and reached back into her pocket and pulled out a black case. Inside the case were two pictures. One was the same photograph of the seventeen-year-old Karen that Whitman had carried and lost in the river. The other was a photograph of Karen standing next to her father, who sat in a high-backed chair.

Whitman looked at the pictures and then at the woman, at her wide eyes and small nose and delicate lips. There were tears in her faded blue eyes. She looked old, much older than twenty-two. Her lower lip quivered and he remembered he had something to tell her about her father. He handed the letters back and cleared his throat.

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The man behind her stepped forward and took off his sombrero and said something in Spanish. Both he and the little boy bowed.

Karen put her hand on the boy's head and said, "This is my husband, Bernardo Galvez, and these are my children, Juan and Felicia."

Whitman needed coffee badly, so he asked them to follow him into the hotel. He led them back into the dining area and held a chair for Karen.

Her husband hesitated before sitting, pulling the boy up on his lap.

Whitman put his elbows up on the table and rubbed his eyes for a long time, until he heard a woman say, "You want some coffee?"

He opened his eyes and saw the little boy staring at him with chocolate-brown eyes. The boy glanced to his left, at the plate of a cowboy at the next table, a plate of eggs and beefsteak.

Whitman suddenly noticed the rich smell of cooked meat. It made his stomach rumble. He recognized the short, squat woman standing beside the table as one of the cooks at the hotel. "We'll have beefsteaks and eggs all around, and coffee," he said.

The woman looked at Bernardo and then at the hungry little boy and nodded.

Whitman turned to Karen, who was rocking the little girl now, moving back and forth. "I've got some bad news to tell you."

"My father's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

Her eyes glistened, a tear rolling down her cheek. She talked to her husband in Spanish and Bernardo made the sign of the cross.

When Karen had composed herself, Whitman took out his credentials and laid them in front of her and said he was there to tell her she was a wealthy woman—one of the wealthiest people in New Orleans, now.

Karen swallowed hard and looked down at her daughter, who also had chocolate-brown eyes, and began to hum.

The coffee arrived and the squat woman poured three cups. Whitman picked his up with two hands and managed to get some of it down. He also managed to spill some on the checkered tablecloth.

"Mr. Whitman," Karen said, sliding his credentials back. "Would you be taking us to New Orleans?"

He noticed she kept her head down when she spoke, so he couldn't see her mouth. "Yes, I'm supposed to bring you to New Orleans, if you want."

He'd sent a wire, just yesterday, to Mr. Pinkerton, saying how he had a lead, how he felt sure he was going to find Karen Duncan. Another telegram would be needed, one for tickets and more expense money. Whitman took another sip of coffee and planned

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what he had to do next, anything to keep from thinking about Paula.

He looked at the husband and said, "What did you say your name was?"

Karen interpreted and the man said, "Bernardo Galvez."

Whitman told Karen they would surely fit in back in New Orleans, reminding her that one of Louisiana's Spanish governors had been named Bernardo de Galvez, an old Castilian family.

"I know," Karen said, and he saw this time that a front tooth was missing.

The beefsteaks and eggs arrived. Bernardo picked up his knife and fork and poked cautiously at the steak until Karen said something to him and he smiled. He and the boy ate quickly. Karen ate slower, sharing with her daughter.

Whitman drank more coffee and as soon as Bernardo and the boy finished, he passed his plate to them.

"Muchas gracias," Bernardo said with a wide smile. The boy thanked him, too. Whitman remembered the boy's name was Juan and the girl was Felicia. He looked at their soiled clothes and thought that they would never be poor again.

Money would replace Karen's tooth and fatten her children and she would never be hungry again either. Whitman felt a little better knowing that.

He asked Karen how she knew he was asking about her.

"Word travels fast around here."

Then he asked her about Paula.

She took in a deep breath and said yes, she knew Paula Lewis. She'd spoken to the doctor. That's how she knew Whitman would be coming out of the doctor's office.

"Paula was the most beautiful woman I've ever known," Karen said. "And kind. She gave us money and food when we had none." She took a bite of steak and gave her daughter a piece.

"You should eat something," she told Whitman, but he only shook his head and closed his eyes hard to keep the tears from coming. He could see Paula's face, lit by a desert firelight, and he felt an ache in his chest so painful he thought he would black out again.

Standing at the Tombstone train station, Whitman tapped the breast pocket of his suit coat. The telegram from Mr. Pinkerton was still there, congratulating him on finding Karen Duncan. Mr. Pinkerton promised him a bonus.

Karen Duncan sat on a wooden bench, her daughter playing with a handmade doll at her feet. Bernardo and Juan played catch with an old baseball on the platform. Neither had a glove.

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Whitman turned to the man in the ticket office and asked how long now before the train came.

"You got about an hour."

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Whitman looked over at Boot Hill. He told Karen he'd be right back and walked across the dusty road to the cemetery. He'd planned on looking for the newest grave, but had no problem finding Paula's. Butch sat next to it, his hat in hand.

Butch stood up when he saw Whitman. "Sure is a rough life out here for a woman."

Whitman nodded.

Butch put his hat on. "She sure was a sight to behold." Hunched over, the old man began to move away. He stopped and added, "I brung that roan mare a' yours back to the corral."

Whitman thanked him and said, "I thought only outlaws were buried in Boot Hill."

The old man shrugged and walked away.

Turning back to the white wooden cross on Paula's grave, he noticed someone had carved the word "Pretty" on it. He closed his eyes and saw her face again in the firelight. Then he remembered how she'd smiled when she told him what she was going to do with all that money.

He remembered the desert nights—planning their life in New Orleans. One day they even went back to the San Pedro to bathe naked together under the bright sun. She gave him so much passion he thought his heart would burst.

Now, standing next to her dusty grave, when he thought of New Orleans, of the familiar balconies of home, he felt sick.

He felt a well of emotion in his throat. His heart ached so. He wanted to cry, but he saw men watching him from the street. He wouldn't cry here. Not now. *There will be time later,* he told himself. *Lots of time.*

A breath of wind blew across Boot Hill, across Paula's fresh grave, raising a cloud of dust. And for a moment he smelled her skin and felt her hair brush his face.

He looked around, but it was just the wind. ●

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Stately Homes and the Invisible Slasher

by Arthur Porges

"Homes."

"Yes, Sun Wat?"

"I was just wondering—odd, I'd never thought to ask you before—why do you call those little ragamuffins of yours 'The Baker Street Irregulars'?"

Stately Homes (of England), my old friend and mentor, a brilliant man who had brought me from India to London to act as a valued colleague in his detective work, gave me a strange stare, nothing like his usual assured, keen gaze. In fact, he seemed a bit at a loss for a reply. Then, after a long pause, he said: "You know, I can't really recall how that started, but I suspect that what with their dreadful lower-class diet, they all suffered from persistent, intermittent costiveness."

Actually, I must confess, I wasn't much interested, but I'd seen that he was about to take up his violin, and not like any normal performer, but to place against his knees. As a Sikh, I'm not yet accustomed to Western music, even at its best, but as my friend held the instrument, not even the great virtuoso Sarasate, whom Homes had recently heard and enthusiastically admired, could have produced anything worth hearing. As the dreadful keening began, I realized my attempt to divert him had failed, so I hastily tried another approach, one I was certain he could not resist.

"Homes," I said firmly, "here's a truly amazing murder mystery in today's *Times*."

Arthur Porges debuted in *EQMM* in 1957 with a parody in the very same series to which he returns here. Parodies were very popular with *EQMM*'s founding editor: if you've collected early issues, you'll be able to find dozens of examples of detective heroes who were made the object of a parodist's wit. This new entry in the Stately Homes series is part of our tribute to the Baker Street Irregulars (see p. 59). †

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Reluctantly, he put down his bow, and I relaxed.

"Really? Brief me, old fellow. A good puzzle may be exactly what I need. I'm getting quite stale. What are the salient facts; skip the journalistic maunderings."

"It's what some call a 'locked-room mystery,' I believe. You know—one that seems totally impossible on the face of it, yet has happened. Here's a gentleman who was found with his throat savagely slashed, pools of blood all around, and as if that wasn't enough to do the job, several deep puncture wounds in his skull."

"And the impossible part?"

"There's only one plausible suspect—the only person alone with the victim at the time of death—yet he was thoroughly searched on the spot. No weapon was found, nothing that could cut or pierce."

That definitely caught my friend's attention, and to my relief, he put his violin on the table. "Go on," he said.

"Well, the dead man is one Scrooge—no, not that one; he's dead, but a son of a nephew of his. The man who was found with the victim was, as a child, small, frail, and crippled; but when fully grown weighed twenty-four stone and stood six feet four inches tall. He had been called 'Tiny Tim,' a mawkish name I wouldn't care for, and in later years the 'Tiny' nickname still stuck."

"None of that is relevant," Homes said irritably. "Spare me."

"Very well, but my point is that Tiny, had he wished to, could have dispatched Scrooge by pulling off his head like a cork from a bottle, but didn't do so."

"Why would he wish to harm his victim, assuming he's the murderer?"

"To begin with, this Scrooge is even more avaricious and beastly than the original, and unlike him, never repented and reformed. The two men had been at odds for some time, with Tim Cratchit charging he had been fleeced out of some five thousand pounds by Scrooge, who refused to make amends and even denied any wrongdoing.

"Now here's the situation: Scrooge had a two-room office on the fifth floor of a commercial building, and all around it were other businesses with people constantly coming and going. Cratchit turned up, went in to see his nemesis, and those outside heard the sounds of a violent quarrel. The noise then stopped, and shortly after, Cratchit emerged. He was obviously much agitated—pale, sweating—and had apparently bitten his lip, since a trickle of blood was flowing down his chin."

"What was his explanation?"

"That Scrooge had gone into the smaller room and closed the door, saying he wouldn't discuss anything with Tim. Angry, Cratchit went after him a few minutes later, only to find him brutally murdered as I've described. He told those crowding around him to call the police at once, and then demanded that he be

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searched, lest they believe him to be the killer. Yet, who else could there be, what with only one window in each room, and those five stories up a blank wall? As I said, totally impossible, don't you agree, Homes?"

"It's a tough nut," he admitted thoughtfully, "but I remind you, Sun Wat, that when one has eliminated all the improbable solutions, whatever remains, however implausible—how does that infernal axiom of mine go?"

"Yes, I know," I said brusquely. "I've heard it often, and never quite the same, especially as to grammar."

But he was lost in thought again, and ignored my jibe. Then he said, "Do you spot the underlying irony here? As we learned from Dickens, Tiny Tim was saved by money and medical help from the born-again Scrooge, and now a relation of his is dead at the hands of a Cratchit. It's a strange world, is it not?"

"Truly, sahib."

"I hope," he said glumly, "that Lestrade and his bunch don't come charging in, asking for my help. I need time to think."

"Tell them you're sitting up with a Sikh friend," I quipped.

He ignored my feeble attempt at humor.

"It's clear, as indicated by the rule I just mentioned, that Cratchit must be the culprit, since nobody else was with Scrooge, so unless some invisible slasher flew through the window, quickly dispatched the old man, and then vanished, Tiny is guilty. And yet," he added darkly, "I find myself in a fog, a mental haze not to be pierced. I fancy, Sun Wat, that this may be a case for my brother, Myalgia. Yes, he can be a pain in the arse, but his grasp of cold logic exceeds even mine. Why, just last month he made some suggestions about space and time that greatly excited a gifted young scientist, one Einhorn—or is it Einstein; no matter, some German. Only Professor Moriarty could understand the mathematics, I suspect. It's true I used some good basic physics in that matter of parsley sinking in melted butter, but my real forte, as you know, is chemistry."

Before I could reply, not that I had anything substantive to offer, he reached for his violin, so I fled the room to seek refuge with our devoted Swedish landlady, Mrs. Hutsut, even as that vile screeching of tortured strings assailed my ears.

Fortunately, the playing soon ceased, and Homes went out, almost certainly, I knew, to seek out his brother at the Diogenes Club.

When he returned two hours later, his mood was enormously changed for the better.

"Sun Wat!" he cried. "I was right to seek out Myalgia. Unlike me, he follows cultural and, I must say, trivial doings regularly, and no sooner had I mentioned the name Tiny Tim Cratchit than it struck a chord with him, and from a bundle of notes he pulled out an account from some five years ago about a remarkable, even

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incredible, entertainer of that name. This fellow, who makes a living eating what would kill you or me—nails, pins, crockery, and the like—won a large bet by consuming, over eight days, a whole hansom cab, followed by the horse, which had fortuitously expired—probably from the shock of seeing its equipage devoured. In any case, when I learned of Cratchit's bizarre exploit, my mind was no longer nubilated, and I saw it all clearly."

"I don't follow you, Homes," I said. "What's the connection?"

"It's quite obvious," he said, his eyes glowing. "It even accounts for that blood on his chin; even an expert can cut his mouth or tongue when chewing broken glass. And there's that puzzling little anomaly I was told about by the police, that a small aspidistra plant was missing from the inner office, leaving only the pot."

I was speechless, and just stared at him in wonder.

"Don't you see? Cratchit, determined to do in his life-long enemy, hides a big shard of glass on his person, something sharp as a samurai sword, and dagger-pointed.

"With it, he slashes Scrooge's throat, and in an excess of hate, savagely thrusts the point into the old man's skull. And then, sure his victim is dead, he breaks the glass dagger into small pieces, chews and swallows them—a feat he has performed often in public. One, I might add—why did I not think of it sooner?—common to many entertainers with circuses."

"Wonderful, Homes!" I exclaimed. "A real triumph for you, and what an amazing story." I hesitated. "What about the aspidistra? I don't—"

"It's called a rubber plant by most."

I stared at him again in bewilderment.

"Cratchit confessed all when confronted with the evidence, and when I asked about the plant, guess what he said?"

"Well?"

"When eating glass, he likes a side dish, preferably a raw vegetable."

There was nothing I could say, so I just shook my head wonderingly.

Homes reached for his violin, and I cringed.

"I must play a suitably celebratory piece," he announced. "A new, very unusual composer."

As I said, I know little about Western music, but have seen some reviews in the daily journals. "Ravel? Debussy? Can it be Bartok?"

"No, my friend, but I'm surprised that you know three moderns. However, there's one who suits my pawky mood right now—the perfect choice for a man of Cratchit's talents."

"And that is?" I inquired sulkily.

"Who else but that young Turk, Philip Glass!"

Whereupon he reached for that damned fiddle, and I fled. ●

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We'll Always Have Barstow

by William Bankier

"I need a change of scene," Parkinson Ellis said.

Charlie Peterson was dealing cards. "Want to move the game to the kitchen?"

"I need to get out of town."

"You deserve a break after what you've been through. Pair of jacks bets a dollar."

The poker players, gathered on a Thursday evening in Peterson's opulent home in the Hollywood Hills, bet or folded.

"Guess I'll get in the car and drive east. Through the desert."

"Vegas?"

"Vegas has become a carnival. Maybe Laughlin."

"Laughlin is good," Charlie Peterson said. "You can get into some nice quiet trouble in Laughlin."

The con-man tale is one of the rarer types of mystery story, perhaps because it's so very hard to think of a really good con. Few writers are more accomplished at the form than William Bankier, who always manages to make his con artists sympathetic—even after we've discovered what they've done. This latest tale takes us to Laughlin, Nevada where "some nice quiet trouble" awaits the unwary. ✝

A week later, Parky Ellis lay on the bed in room 1776 of the Ramada Hotel and Casino in Laughlin, Nevada, and thought about Pristeen Costello. Was he being unfaithful to the memory of his late wife, allowing his mind to dwell on the lanky cocktail waitress? Linda had been dead for only two months. Parky decided he could let himself off the hook because she had left him for that hunky rock guitarist. He was driving drunk near Monterey when the car soared off the road and carried them to the sea.

After eighteen years of marriage, he and Linda had become like brother and sister. But she was a good person and it was a sad thing that she was gone.

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Somebody was knocking at the door. "Who is it?"

"Security. Need to talk to you."

As he crossed the room, Parky checked himself in the mirror—grey hair too short to be mussed, dim light masking the liver spots and wrinkles. If he could fake a smile, his fifty-three years were a reasonable fit.

He opened the door on a young man dressed all in dark blue. He had the pinkish face that goes with coarse red hair and he was holding some sort of badge beside his face. "I'm Agent James Fardo—" he glanced both ways— "Can we go inside?"

Moving into the room, he said, "Traveling alone, sir?"

"Yes."

"Can you show me some ID?" He put his hand out.

Obedient beyond comprehension, Parky offered his driver's license. Agent Fardo read it aloud: "Parkinson Ellis, Los Angeles." He gave back the wallet. "Well, Mr. Ellis, you may be in a bit of trouble."

"For what?"

"Lady in the lounge says you threw a drink on her dress."

"What lady?"

"Expensive dress. I saw it."

"This stinks." Parky reached for the telephone. "I'm calling the desk."

"That won't be necessary." The security man buried the bedside telephone under a giant hand. "This is a reasonable lady. She says if you pay for the dress, she'll forget about the incident."

"There's no lady and no dress. This is a rip-off."

"Three hundred dollars will take care of it. You can pay me now."

"Get out of here."

"Don't get physical, sir. I'm authorized to use force."

"I sure as hell am going to tell somebody about you, Agent Fardo."

When the young man had gone down the corridor, walking on the balls of his feet, Parky decided not to go through the hassle of an official report. Instead, he went downstairs in search of Pristeen Costello. The incident would give them something to talk about.

As he rode a down elevator, Parky had to smile. Charlie Peterson's prediction regarding trouble in Laughlin was coming true. Charlie was a producer of action movies. He would get a kick out of this bizarre scenario.

The cocktail waitress handed Parky his free glass of beer and he placed a dollar tip on her tray. They were standing in front of the slot machine that had paid him a jackpot three nights ago. It was

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his favorite, but, truth be told, Parky had never met a slot machine he didn't like.

"I know this guy," Pristeen said. He had described the encounter before she went to get his beer. "He's no security man."

"What is he?"

"He works on the crew that empties the machines early in the morning. His name is Jimmy Fardo."

"Then that much was true."

"He's a decent guy. I'm surprised he tried to con you. Jimmy must be stressed."

"How well do you know him?"

"We hung out together in Barstow for a couple of months. I was behind the counter in a Quik Stop at an Arco station. He was on his way to Laughlin for this project he's working on when he stopped for gas. He stayed at my place overnight and it just kept going."

"Sounds like true love."

"Longest I've been with anybody. When he finally moved on, I followed him." Pristeen Costello was chorus-girl pretty, with perfect legs in sheer blue tights. She had innocent eyes, and honey hair enfolded her face like the wings of a dove. This was yet another time when Parky Ellis regretted his age.

The girl said, "You could report Jimmy for what he did. Management will fire him. But I'd be careful about that."

"Is he dangerous?"

"Oh, sure. Jimmy could drive you into the desert and nobody would ever see you again."

Next morning, Parky got up early and came downstairs into the casino that never sleeps. A lone blackjack player sat at a green baize table, accepting cards from his dealer. The occasional insomniac roamed from slot to slot, obeying the gambler's directive to keep on smoking.

He did not have long to wait. Here they came, the collection crew with their motorized train of caged hoppers. An empty plastic bucket was placed on the carpet in front of each slot machine. A man with a key unlocked the floor-level doors; the buckets inside, heavy with yesterday's take, were switched with empty buckets, the cabinets locked, the coins loaded into the hoppers, and the train moved on with warning signal beeping, followed by an older man whose job seemed to be to watch everybody else.

And there was Jimmy Fardo, handling the buckets, moving bent over like a farm laborer. Parky approached him. "We meet again, Agent Fardo."

"You're up early."

"I didn't report you."

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"Report what?"

"You pretending to be security."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The man who was paid to watch approached. "Please don't talk to the crew, sir."

Parky stayed put as the crew moved on. "I need to talk to you, Jimmy," he called after them.

Dropping the occasional coin, watching the icons tumble and stop on the payline, he kept the collection crew in sight. Their job ended as the train rolled through a doorway and heavy doors closed. Some of the crew accompanied the cargo, but others, including James Fardo, dispersed. Parky followed him through glass doors onto the parking lot. He overtook him as he put his key into the door-lock of a rusty sedan.

"You can stop pretending now," he said.

Fardo turned and confronted his pursuer. There was something subtly different about his appearance. His facial expression was now jovial as opposed to the official frown of the bogus security man. "You're persistent."

"Try curious."

"I can understand that. Climb in, I'll explain as we drive."

"I'm not sure I should go anywhere with you."

"Come on. There's breakfast at the end of the road."

Fardo got behind the wheel, reached across, and opened the door on the passenger side. Parky climbed into the old vehicle with its smell of mildew and the tiny leather boxing gloves suspended from the rearview mirror. When they were under way, the driver said, "The truth is, I am a writer and director of motion pictures."

"I've always wondered what the truth is."

"Stranger than fiction, some say."

"Have I seen your work?"

"Not yet. This is the first one." He turned off Casino Drive and headed into the desert.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace special. Relax, you'll like it."

As they drove, Parky made conversation. "My friend, Charlie Peterson, is going to get a kick out of this. He's a movie producer."

"You know Charles Peterson? He's famous."

"We play poker on Thursday nights. We play golf at Reseda Country Club. I'm in real estate. I sold Charlie's old house and found him his current dwelling in the Hollywood Hills."

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Then Fardo said, "I'm making a movie about a guy who gets a job on a casino collection crew. His aim is, along with a few accomplices, to rob the casino. His plan includes involving an innocent stranger in the plot."

"Like the way they used Peter Ustinov in *Topkapi*."

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"My method of developing a script is to enact parts of the story in real life. As far as possible. Then, as things happen, I include them in the scenario. Or not."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble."

"But worth it. I see how people behave."

"This person wants out of the car."

"Cool out."

Laughlin is a tiny interruption in the vast and scrubby desert. They were driving at speed into that wasteland. Jimmy Fardo left the paved road and began following a rutted track towards a distant purple mesa.

"Where are we going?"

"Nearly there."

They were exactly nowhere. Glancing back at the highway, which was almost out of sight, the driver said, "Here we are." He slowed, stopped, opened the door, and climbed out. "Let's go, Parky."

When Parky Ellis climbed unwillingly from the car, his companion was at the trunk unlocking it, lifting the lid. Something was different; he now had an automatic pistol in his hand. "What's going on?"

"The geezer walks reluctantly to the back of the car and looks into the trunk. Do it!"

The trunk contained the usual automotive accessories. A shovel with a pointed blade lay on top. It looked new. "Grab that shovel, my friend."

He did as he was told. Fardo said, "Step over here." He moved several feet from the car onto flat, sandy ground. "Dig."

Parky stared at the distant highway. A solitary car sped past, smaller than a toy. "This is more of your scriptwriting?"

"Exactly. You are a sad victim being forced to dig his own grave."

"It's hot. Let's say I dug it."

"No, you have to do it. The writer is not sure what happens. If you rebel, I'll have to shoot you. The story takes a whole new turn."

Parky put the point of the spade into the earth and pressed it down with the sole of his shoe. He turned the soil. It was easy digging. "You're crazy, right? Out of your head?"

"At times. I left home in Pomona because my parents and my brothers and sisters were from another planet."

Parky began to enjoy the exercise. His mind was working more clearly. "Something you should know, James. I told Pristeen I was coming to see you this morning, early. To confront you. If I disappear, you'll be the first one the police talk to."

Fardo beamed. "Nice one, Parky. Very neat. You may be lying, but I can't take the chance. The victim buys his life with a clever

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ploy." He headed back to the car, tucking the gun into the waistband of his trousers. "Leave your grave, stow the shovel, and resume your role as passenger."

"Where now?"

"To visit with Pristeen Costello. She promised to make breakfast."

There were only a dozen or so vehicles in the trailer park. All but one were of the common variety—boxes on wheels. Pristeen's was stainless steel and shaped something like the container for a giant cigar.

"You like?" she said from the kitchenette where she was frying bacon. "A man gave me a good deal on it when I was leaving Barstow in pursuit of this dreamer. All my savings."

"I could have used that money in my project." Fardo winked at Parky to show he was teasing.

"With me back home and you on the loose in the casinos?"

"I'll never leave you again, Pris. Guess what? After this movie is in the can, I intend to do one in Paris."

"Paris, Texas?"

"Paris, France. You and me, kid. On the Left Bank. Breakfast at a sidewalk cafe on the Champs Élysées."

She brought plates to the table. "In the meantime, you'll settle for the blue-plate special in the Mojave Desert."

The food tasted good and there was plenty of coffee. Parky said, "I have to admit, I'm beginning to have fun."

"I put him through the grave-digging. He knows what's going on."

"Good," Pristeen said. "I hate keeping secrets."

"Which brings me to my main pitch," Fardo said. "Can you lay your hands on twenty thousand dollars?"

"Not easily, no." Parky became defensive.

"But you have it. You could get it if there was a good enough reason."

"And you have the reason."

"I want to make a twenty-minute version of my movie. Sort of like a trailer. So I can show it to studio executives and get them interested in my project."

"It's the best way," Pristeen said.

Fardo went on, "I have to rent some equipment, the camera, lights. And I have to pay a good cameraman. I know the guy, but he's not cheap. Twenty grand would cover everything."

"I'm not sure," Parky said. He had more than that amount in the bank back in L.A. But this looked like a shaky investment at best. Being around Pristeen Costello was a plus. And Fardo himself was not boring. "I'm not sure," he said, smiling apologetically.

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The deal was, he would go back to L.A. and make arrangements to free up the cash from his money-market funds. When he had it, he would call Fardo, who would arrive and take possession, signing any legal paper Parky chose to prepare. Fardo had to come to Los Angeles anyway to hire his cameraman, acquire the equipment, and interview a couple of actors. Magic names were dropped: Brad and Tom and Sly.

During his drive alone back to the city, Parky made up his mind. He was going to have nothing to do with this enterprise. At best, it was a flawed dream. Jimmy Fardo was a borderline sociopath. He was whatever he pretended to be. One minute, a hotel security man. Then an aspiring screenwriter. Where was the script? Parky had not seen it.

Would Fardo have shot Parky if he had finished digging his grave without saying he'd confided in Pristeen? There would have been no money in that, but maybe he was the type who sometimes killed for the thrill of it.

Once settled back in his Brentwood condo, Parky realized his mind was made up. He would not take the money from the bank. The kids in Nevada would never hear from him again. They did not know where he lived. This episode in his life was over.

Three days later, while he was having a late breakfast, his doorbell rang and there was Pristeen Costello. Parky had been sitting in the kitchen, missing his wife, and was, therefore, glad of the interruption. The Nevada cocktail waitress looked different. She was dressed in a conservative grey suit, her hair pinned back, her face clear of the showgirl makeup.

"How did you find me?"

"No problem. I checked the front-desk register at the Ramada."

"Are hotels supposed to let you do that?"

"I made it official. I'm with the FBI, Parky. We've been trying to nail Jimmy Fardo for a long time. Now you're going to help us."

"Just when I thought I was out, you're going to draw me back in." He stepped aside. "You'd better come in and have some coffee."

At the kitchen table, she said, "You were right to back away. Fardo was going to rip you off. There is no movie. If you'd given him the twenty thousand, he'd have been gone."

"You two had me fooled. I thought you were his girl."

"The Barstow story? That was true. I went underground and got close to him. We planned to fly to Paris and make some memories, to be like Bogie and Bergman in *Casablanca.*"

"You make me feel sorry it won't happen. Jimmy is an entertaining guy."

"He's a crook. And you're going to help us nail him."

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Agent Pristeen Costello explained the plan. Parky would withdraw twenty thousand dollars from his money-market fund. He would seal it in a 9 x 12 Manila envelope. She gave him one for that purpose. A meeting would be arranged between Parky and Fardo. Once the money changed hands, Pristeen and fellow agents would swoop in for the capture.

Parkinson Ellis called his bank to set the wheels in motion. The money would be available tomorrow. Pristeen wrote digits on a piece of paper.

"When you have the money, call me at this number. Then call Fardo at this one." She wrote again. "Make arrangements to meet that same day at Barney's Beanery. Do you know where that is?"

"Second-best chili in Los Angeles. I know it well."

Parky was enjoying himself when he went into the bank to collect the twenty grand. This was more fun than showing houses. Outside the bank, he joined Pristeen, who was waiting beside the unmarked police car in which she had chauffered him to the bank.

"I'd better have this." She took the fat envelope from him and locked it in the trunk of the car. "We don't want you wandering around for hours with that much money."

"Jimmy sounded excited when I called him. I almost wanted everything to be true."

"There is no movie."

"I meet him at two-thirty at Barney's. What do we do till then?"

She drove to Pacific Coast Highway. They stood on the high promontory looking across at the midway beside the Santa Monica pier. They crossed the street and had a leisurely lunch at Crocodile. Pristeen picked up the check. "This is on the Bureau," she said.

It was time to drive back to Barney's. She parked a couple of blocks away. They got out of the car; she unlocked the trunk and retrieved the fat brown envelope. He took it from her and tucked it under his arm.

"Play it cool. We'll be watching from outside. You won't see us. When you make the exchange, get up and leave. We'll do the rest."

Parky entered the restaurant and took a booth by the window. It was past lunchtime; the place was not busy. His mind was racing. Would Fardo see something in his face? Would he cut and run before the deal went down?

Parky tried to think of other things. The movie; men holding up a Laughlin casino. Too bad it would never be made. It sounded like a good caper.

He began watching the time. Two-thirty came and went. Then half-past three. He still had the number he had called to set up the meeting with Fardo. He went to the telephones and dialed.

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The phone rang ten times before he put it down. Jimmy must be on his way.

Back in the booth, he watched four o'clock come and go. For a man coming to collect twenty grand, Fardo was not in much of a hurry.

A whisper of doubt crept into his mind and said, "Don't you get it? What took you so long?"

He picked up the fat envelope from the seat beside him and tore the flap. He looked in at the packs of cut newspaper, dollar size. Cold sweat coated his chest. He thought about calling the police, then decided not to. It would be embarrassing. He sought and found a face-saving rationale. For a couple of weeks, he had been part of an adventure. It had cost him money he could afford to lose.

On the freeway, headed for northern California and points beyond, Jimmy Fardo counted the money, then stowed it in Pristeen Costello's shoulder bag. From behind the wheel, she said, "It's a nice payday. But really not enough to take us to Paris."

"That's all right, kid," he said with a toothy Bogart inflection. "We'll always have Barstow."

A month went by. It was relaxing to be back in Charlie Peterson's game room with the cards on the table. Parky had decided to avoid the embarrassment of telling what a fool he had been. But he had another idea. Jimmy Fardo's movie scenario was a good one. He thought he might tell it as his own.

"While I was in Laughlin," he said, "I got an idea for a movie. I saw the crew that comes around in the early morning and unloads the cash from the slot machines. So how about a guy who gets a job with that crew? It puts him inside the operation. He has accomplices, including a beautiful girl who works as a cocktail waitress. This is the premise. The plot can be worked out."

"You amaze me," Peterson said.

"How come?"

"Couple of weeks ago, I ran into this charismatic guy at Reseda Golf Club. In the bar. He said he's an independent moviemaker. He told me the exact same plot."

"Jimmy Fardo."

"That was his name. Guy conned me out of twenty grand to make a test video. He was supposed to call me. He's long gone."

"I remember Fardo," Parky said. It seemed very important for him to repair his damaged pride. On the instant, he transformed himself into a con man. It was surprisingly easy. "We had drinks in Laughlin. How do you like that? The sonofagun stole my idea!" O

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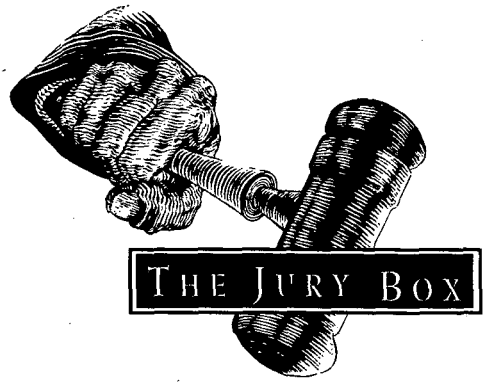

by Jon L. Breen

Is any contemporary writer of crime fiction more versatile than Stuart M. Kaminsky? The former MWA president began his mystery career with magazine short stories of the pure puzzle sort. Then, drawing on his expertise as a film historian, he introduced Hollywood private eye Toby Peters, whose comic encounters with stars from Hollywood's Golden Age began with *Bullet for a Star* (1977) and total twenty to date. The series of modular police procedurals about Moscow cop Porfiry Petrovich Rostnikov, beginning with *Death of a Dissident* (1981), traces the changes in Russian society from orderly totalitarianism to precarious freedom and won him a best-novel Edgar for *A Cold Red Sunrise* (1988). (The 13th and latest in the Rostnikov series is *Fall of a Cosmonaut* [Mysterious, $24.95].) A rare non-series novel, *When the Dark Man Calls* (1983) is a fine example of pure suspense with a talk-radio background. Kaminsky has even created new adventures for Jim Rockford of the famous '70s TV series, *The Rockford Files.* But his greatest creation may be the deeply if complicatedly moral Chicago police detective Abe Lieberman, who is both very good and very interesting, not an easy combination to bring off.

**** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *The Big Silence,* Forge, $23.95. In their sixth appearance, Lieberman and his Irish-American partner Bill Hanrahan, who address each other as Rabbi and Father, work on several cases: a con game targeting senior citizens with a driveway repaving offer, the crime spree of a black/white team of convenience store robbers, the murder of a homeless former football star, and the kidnapping of a protected witness's teenage son. But their personal and family dilemmas carry at least as much interest. This is the rare series in which the extensive cast of continuing

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secondary characters are an asset rather than a liability.

**** Elmore Leonard: *Pagan Babies,* Delacorte, $24.95. Father Terry Dunn, returning to Detroit from Africa with tax-fraud charges hanging over his head, doesn't act like a typical priest for very good reasons. He joins with ex-con and would-be stand-up comic Debbie Dewey to confound their enemies in a first-rate example of the kind of fast-reading and funny criminous comedy (with some very serious overtones) that has made Leonard so popular and successful.

*** James Lee Burke: *Purple Cane Road,* Doubleday, $24.95. Louisiana sheriff's detective Dave Robicheaux becomes involved in several intertwined cases, including the murder of a state executioner, for whose *own* execution one of two twin sisters is scheduled to die, and the death many years before of Robicheaux's wayward mother. There is nothing especially original in Burke's plots, his stagecraft, or the macho/sensitive paces he puts his lead character through. But as a wordsmith, he has few peers. The prose is beautifully wrought, the sounds and smells and warm damp of the Bayou setting palpable.

*** Anne Perry: *Slaves of Obsession,* Ballantine, $25. When an English munitions maker, whose goods are sought by both the Union and the Confederacy, is murdered, his young daughter flees to America with the North's agent. In an effort to bring her back, amnesiac private detective William Monk and wife Hester, once a nurse with Florence Nightingale in the Crimea, you might recall, visit the Civil-War-torn United States. On their return, barrister Oliver Rathbone is seen once again in Old Bailey action. The baggage carried by these three series characters gets heavier with each book, and Perry's trial scenes are far looser procedurally than they used to be. Still, the sense of the period in Britain and America is good, and the action finale is nicely managed.

*** Simon Brett: *The Body on the Beach,* Berkley, $21.95. The creator of Charles Paris and Mrs. Pargeter breathes new life into the English-village mystery in the first of a projected series about a seaside community called Fethering. As always, there is plenty of humor—and yes, a neighboring community is called Tarring—but Brett plays it straight enough in a neatly plotted variation on the old vanishing corpse ploy. It's not clear whether the new resident named Jude (a bit of a mystery herself) will continue as sleuth with retired Home Office bureaucrat Carole Seddon as her Watson or whether other village residents will come to the fore in subsequent books.

*** William J. Mann: *The Biograph Girl,* Kensington, $23. In the pre-World War I infancy of

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motion pictures, Florence Lawrence became the first movie star. After a long decline, she died a suicide in 1938. What if another woman died in her place and Lawrence lived on in anonymity, finally discovered in the 1990s as a 107-year-old nursing home patient? Though this novel is more mainstream than mystery, the question of how the faked death came about is a central concern—its details and the final surprise twist are craftily worked out. Silent movie buffs, to whom the title and evocative dust jacket should be enough to sell this book, will regret there isn't even more detail on vaudeville and early movie-making, and some readers may find the gay and straight romantic life of the present-day characters only fitfully interesting. On balance, though, this deeply felt and cleverly constructed account of the mixed blessings of celebrity is a pleasurable reading experience.

** Robert S. Levinson: *The James Dean Affair,* Forge, $24.95. Dean has in common with Florence Lawrence motion picture stardom, a tragically premature death, and a novel hypothesizing he lived longer than we think. Questions of good taste aside, the author's central idea is intriguing. Did Dean survive that 1955 car crash to become a serial killer of some former colleagues, including Sal Mineo, Nick Adams, and Natalie Wood? There are some interesting Hollywood tidbits and plot twists, but the overwrought action and messy transitions from first to third person are more annoying than entertaining. The sleuthing team of columnist Neil Gulliver and soap opera star Stevie Marriner lack charm.

Among the reprints are some highlights of 1999. Steven Saylor's *Rubicon* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $6.50), the latest about Ancient Roman detective Gordianus the Finder, is well up to series standard. Ian Rankin's *Dead Souls* (St. Martin's, $6.50) is a fine entry in the series about Scottish cop John Rebus and a rare example of a mystery novel that justifies its 400-plus page length. Rennie Airth's Edgar-nominated *River of Darkness* (Penguin, $6.99) combines a vivid picture of post-World War I Britain with an involving cop-versus-serial-killer thriller.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jon L. Breen cannot review his own fiction in this column, but we thought *EQMM* readers would like to know that he, too, has a book of fiction just published. *The Drowning Icecube and Other Stories* (Five Star, $20.95) is a selection of 17 of his 80-plus published stories. The title story is a parody of Ross Macdonald. That and two other tales appeared in *EQMM,* and another was published by our sister magazine, *AHMM.* Mr. Breen has won awards for his fiction as well as for his reviewing. You won't want to miss this glimpse of his other side.

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Art by June Levine

Princess of the Red Silk

by Martin Limón

"Have you deciphered yet, poet, the riddle of the parchment?"

We stood upon the stone parapets of the Great Wall. To the south rolled the verdant hills and green cultivated valleys of the kingdom of the Northern Chin. To the north, brown steppes stretched endlessly into the barren wastelands of the barbarians.

I shuddered at the disturbing sight of so much emptiness and unrolled the silk-wrapped parchment. Captain Hu, commander of the guard, paced impatiently along the central roadway atop the wall, staring into the vast emptiness of the north as if expecting a thousand horsemen to suddenly appear over the rise.

My first impression of the tattered document was that it had been composed by a cultured hand. The black ink characters floated across the page like flowers dancing upon the autumn

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wind. The message itself was no less elegant. From Princess Liao, the daughter of Shi Chong-wan, the Emperor of the Northern Chin.

My name is Meng Li. I am a poet, paid by my patrons to travel from court to court of the various countries that divide up the once-proud empire known as *Chung Guo,* the Central Kingdom. At banquets I recite poetry for the entertainment of the guests. Afterwards, topics are thrown at me so I can compose spontaneous verse. It is a mind-wrenching business, but I am talented, they tell me, and I am paid well. And no one, I believe, in the history of the Central Kingdom has ever had so much opportunity for travel.

Martin Limón's writing credits include twenty short stories and three novels, the most recent of which is *Buddha's Money* (Bantam paperback 1999). More recently, Mr. Limón has received contracts for translations of two of his novels in Asia: *Slicky Boys* will be brought out by the Japanese publisher Kodansha, and *Jade Lady Burning* by the Korean Creative Times Press. The author spent ten years in the U.S. army in Korea. ✝

The letter was a touching paean to loneliness. As a mere child, the princess had been given in marriage to Orkhan, chieftan of the barbarian lands. The marriage itself had been hailed as a master stroke of diplomacy, cementing an alliance that put a stop to the raids by Orkhan and his devilish horsemen on the villages of the Northern Chin. But peace and prosperity was not the subject of the letter. Mostly it was filled with complaints. Of the hard life Princess Liao was subject to on the steppes and the hatred the nomadic women felt towards her because of her culture and her beauty. And it was a plea for her father to order her home.

I handed the parchment to Captain Hu.

"Barbarian tribes surround the Central Kingdom like tiger fish nipping at a whale," I told him. "Another princess exiled cruelly from her family to cement a treaty of peace. This is nothing new in our history, Captain Hu. Why do you show me such a message?"

"Are poets not as clever as military men?" Hu shoved the parchment back and pointed with a calloused finger. "Here! Notice these characters cutting diagonally across the page."

I studied the parchment once again. Hu was correct. Princess Liao had used a technique often employed by the poets of the Central Kingdom. A secondary message was hidden inside the text. "My life is in danger," it said. "Send Meng Li."

Surprise and horror overwhelmed me. What did I have to do with this pitiful princess? And why would anyone want me to leave the comforts of the civilized world and travel out into the merciless void

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occupied by the barbarians? In my shock, I nearly ripped the parchment apart. But I managed, at the last moment, to control myself.

"Why me?" I asked Captain Hu.

The craggy face of the career soldier smirked at my discomfort.

"The women at the court say you were the princess's favorite poet. Once, on a visit here many years ago, she hid behind the curtains in the Great Hall and listened to you recite your gibberish. We all know how foolish young girls can be."

"Yes," I agreed. "Sometimes they are even impressed by commanders of the guard."

Captain Hu's face darkened, but before he could react, a thunderous pounding of hooves approached along the Great Wall. Cavalry, eight horsemen abreast, barreled down upon us. Captain Hu shoved me into a stone recess and pressed his body against mine. The soldiers galloped by on their great steeds, leaving a cloud reeking of horseflesh and leather.

Once they had passed, Captain Hu stepped back and straightened his wool tunic.

"Thank you for saving my life," I said in mock courtesy.

Hu glowered at me. "Only you can save the life of the princess," he said. "Shi Chong-wan himself has given the order. Tomorrow you ride north to the camp of Orkhan the Great."

"What can I, a poor man of letters, possibly accomplish against these brutal warriors of the steppes?"

"You are clever, Poet Meng Li. So it is said in all the royal courts of the Central Kingdom. You will evaluate the situation, you will take appropriate action, and you will tell Orkhan that he must not allow harm to come to Princess Liao."

"And if he does?"

"The treaty will be abrogated. Orkhan's cavalry has been illegally raiding our villages. If you do not convince Orkhan to keep Princess Liao safe, her father, King Shi Chong-wan, will declare war."

I swallowed and gazed into the endless barren steppes. "And if I don't return?"

"Fear not, good poet." Captain Hu slapped me roughly on the back. "If you don't return, a great expedition will be mounted on your behalf. Much blood will be spilled. Poets will write songs to your bravery."

He laughed at that. And continued laughing until I thought the over-muscled fool would pop a rib.

Had I known why I was being summoned, I would have never come to the kingdom of the Northern Chin. But I was here now. And for me to refuse an order of the king would result in a sentence of death. I considered running away, but I knew it was foolhardy. Captain Hu and his secret operatives were watching me.

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How I cursed the foolish Princess Liao! Summoning me, a poet, a man who knew nothing about the harsh life of barbarians, to save her. Does the avarice of admiring young women know no bounds? Certainly I had noticed the ladies of the court glancing at me from behind their scented sleeves. And more than occasionally I had been granted the favor of a personal audience, resulting in a performance more profound than poetry. But I was worried that this summons from Princess Liao might be my last.

Before dawn, I was roused by Captain Hu's soldiers. They escorted me outside to the commandant's courtyard, where I mounted a gray mare laden with provisions for the trek north. At the northern wall of the city a group of women stood near the gate. They bowed and presented me with a bouquet of lilies wrapped in red silk. The oldest of the women stepped forward. "Princess Liao was our patron," she told me. "And a skilled embroiderer of gold filigree. Since she has left us, our guild of silk manufacturers has been bereft of influence at court. Bring her back and we will be eternally grateful."

I leaned down and the old woman wrapped a sash of red silk around my neck. "It was her favorite color," the old woman said.

Captain Hu laughed once again. "It is good," he said. "The barbarians will see you coming from a distance of ten *li*."

Men in brass-studded leather vests pushed open the city gates. Ancient lumber creaked on rusted hinges. The sun was just rising and the flat barrenness before me was suffused in a soft red glow.

I spurred my horse forward.

Maybe this Orkhan, this chief of the barbarians, would prove to be fond of my verse.

If not, I was in serious trouble.

We Chinese believe that a man cannot live without vegetables. In this devilish landscape only grass and weeds grew. How did the barbarians survive? No flowing fields of rice. No plump red turnips. No glowing green cabbages. What did they eat?

The only thing that seemed edible in this desolate land was my tired gray mare and me.

Two days later my provisions were exhausted. Water, I found occasionally in gurgling creeks. But food was no more.

The gray mare fared better than I, munching contentedly on the multitude of grasses that tufted these brown hills.

Ahead was a mighty mountain range, studded with snow-capped craggy peaks. I would find the barbarians before I reached the foothills, Captain Hu had told me. Or, more likely, the barbarians would find me.

I trudged on.

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I lay facedown in the dirt, half-dead from exhaustion and hunger. The earth below me started to shake. And then I felt the pounding of hooves.

I sat up with a start.

They surrounded me. Dirty-faced barbarians with grease-smeared moustaches, ruthless red eyes squinting from beneath fur-tufted caps. Their horses pawed at the earth, studying me with as much greed as their masters.

Were horses in these parts eaters of meat?

One of the warriors motioned toward his steed's rump. When I didn't move, he hopped off his wooden saddle and walked toward me with a bow-legged gait. Soon he had me by the scruff of my neck, and within seconds I was seated behind him on the rear of his pony. At a breathtaking pace, we trotted off across the steppes.

The barbarian reeked of rotten mutton. Still, I was so frightened of falling off that I clung to his waist more tightly than I'd ever clung to the supple body of a perfumed courtesan.

After many hours, we crested a rise and gazed upon a valley that stretched to the banks of a white-capped river. The center of the valley was blanketed by round felt tents.

"Orkhan," the filthy barbarian said, pointing to the central tent.

I dismounted. The horsemen lined up on either side of me as I strode into the encampment. People of all ages—old women, children, young mothers—turned out of their tents to gawk at the silk-robed ambassador from the people of the Central Kingdom.

Wool and felt and fur were all they wore. Sun and grime darkened their curious faces.

When we reached the central tent, the barbarian who reeked of mutton ordered me to stop. Within seconds, the fur-lined flaps of the tent flew back and a huge man emerged.

He wore a knee-length coat made of pure black sable. His moustache was grease-streaked like all the rest, but also peppered with gray. His hat was made of the fur of the marmot and turned up at his high forehead. Intelligent black eyes peered into mine.

"Meng Li," he roared. "I've read your poetry!"

The words were spoken in Chinese so there was no reaction from the crowd. I bowed deeply at the waist.

"You are kind, Great Orkhan, to notice the scribblings of one so humble," I replied.

This drew a huge sighing and then laughter from the crowd. Not from my words, I'm sure, but from the practiced elegance of my bow.

Orkhan frowned.

"You don't take pride in your own poetry?" he asked.

And then I remembered what I'd heard about the uncultured

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ways of the barbarians. How they were boastful of their accomplishments and expected others to be so also.

"I am told," I said, "that my poetry is the best in the Central Kingdom."

Orkhan's frown grew deeper.

Had I read him incorrectly?

"But not as good," he said, "as the bards of the People of the Free Wind."

"How could it be," I asked, "when we Chinese are cooped up in our crowded little valleys?"

At last, Orkhan smiled. I breathed a silent sigh of relief. He motioned for me to enter the tent.

The table in the center of the yurt was piled with the steaming flesh of sheep, boiled, but still bleeding in the center. Goatskin bags hung from the rafters, filled to bursting with the *kumis*, fermented mare's milk. Orkhan and the other barbarians were rapidly becoming drunk on the foul-tasting potion. I smiled and sipped as little as I could get away with.

When they asked me to perform, I composed a poem that I can hardly remember now. All I am sure of is that it was filled with references to swift horses and women taken by force and lakes of flowing blood. These barbarians were the leaders of their small bands and therefore understood much of the language of the Central Kingdom.

When I finished, my back was almost broken by the pounding congratulations of one base lout after another.

All except one young man. He sat proud and aloof. When he noticed my gaze, he returned it with such fierceness that I averted my eyes. No doubt, had I held the man's gaze, he would've leapt across the table and slit my throat.

By way of explaining this strange behavior, one of the other barbarians leaned toward me and whispered incomprehensible syllables in my ear. Some appeared to be Chinese, some weren't. I nodded in thanks and committed the strange words to memory.

Orkhan quieted the crowd and a woman entered the yurt. She was clad from head to toe in an elegantly embroidered gown of red silk. Her face was partially obscured by a peaked shawl that covered her piled black hair. But when I glimpsed her profile there was no doubting who she was. The skin was soft and unburnt by the sun. And her eyebrows had been plucked artfully into a high arch and her lips were as delicate and red as the unfolding bud of a rose.

She was everything that a barbarian woman is not. She was Princess Liao, daughter of Shi Chong-wan, King of the Northern Chin.

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She looked as out of place in this rough company as a porcelain doll in a rock slide.

She performed *li,* the filial rites. Bowing, lighting incense, banging on bronze drums. Praying to heaven to preserve the ancestors and to allow those of us still here on earth the wisdom to obey all proprieties.

Although the barbarians in the tent hadn't the slightest idea of what all the structured movements meant, they paid rapt attention to the cultured lady moving amongst them.

All except for the fierce-eyed man who had forced me to look away. He stood, swiveled, and exited the tent. Orkhan glared at his back but said nothing.

Finally, the ceremony was complete. Princess Liao bowed deeply to her husband, the great chieftan Orkhan. He bowed back and the beautiful silk-clad lady, her head so low she almost touched the ground, backed out of our presence.

As soon as she left, the grease-stained men snatched at the goat skins above them and began greedily guzzling *kumis.*

That night, I lay atop piled marmot furs in a small tent that had been provided for my exclusive use. I couldn't sleep, still seeing visions of the elegant silk-clad lady. Wondering at the sadness in her beautiful face.

Feet shuffled on dirt. I sat up.

"Who's there?" I asked in Chinese. And then realized that I probably wouldn't be understood. I reached for my dagger.

"It is I," a voice replied. "A humble servant."

The voice was female. Princess Liao? But it couldn't be her because the pronunciation was uncultured. Only barely understandable. Had she forgotten her mother tongue?

I rose from my fur mat and ripped back the felt flaps of the yurt.

A young woman cowered before me, kneeling, her head in the dirt. By the light of the moon, I could see her clearly. She wore only a simple wool tunic, dyed as blue as the sky, and her hair was piled in braided circles atop her head, in the manner of the barbarian women.

She bade me allow her enter and so I did.

In the center of the yurt she wheeled, bowing again profusely. She was a small slip of a thing, barely more than a child.

"Who are you?" I whispered. "What do you want?"

"I have been sent by my mistress, the Princess Liao. I am Evenke."

And then I looked more closely at her face, illuminated now by moonlight filtering in from the top of the yurt.

The most striking thing about her was her long nose. Not round at the tip but pointed. And her eyebrows. Like those of a beast. Bushy and full, but giving her eyes a dark luster.

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As I stared, she thrust her head back proudly.

"I am a Turk," she said, "from the Western lands."

I'd heard of them, of course. A marauding band that had once harassed the borders of our Sinkiang Province before being replaced by another troublesome tribe of assassins.

Her face was unusual, but the angular features became more tolerable the more I stared at them. Or maybe it was only the raw mutton I'd eaten tonight.

"You must come with me," she said. "To see my mistress."

I shook my head, whispering urgently, "We will be killed."

"I know the way well through this camp. We will not be caught. Besides, Princess Liao commands it."

She was right. I had no choice. Meeting with Princess Liao was, after all, the reason I had been sent here.

I acquiesced and she led me out beneath the back of the tent. I noticed that Evenke limped. One of her legs had been broken. Still, she moved as deftly as a hunter.

We slipped through the sleeping camp as quietly as glowing moonbeams.

We met amidst a clump of trees on a hill overlooking glimmering campfires.

"Princess Liao," I said when I saw her. I bowed deeply. Her red silk gown was gone, replaced by a wool tunic as simple as the one worn by Evenke. Her hair also was braided atop her head in the manner of the barbarian women. No doubt to disguise herself as she slipped away from her chambers.

"You must save me, Poet Meng Li," she said.

"What can I, a humble writer of verse, do to help you out here in this vast wilderness?"

"You are clever," the princess replied. "You will help me devise a means of escape."

Her face was radiant in the moonlight. Smooth. Unblemished. No wonder Orkhan had sacrificed so much to take her as his bride.

"There is much tension in this camp," she said. "Orkhan is a despot, yet he will not allow his young men to fight the Chinese. The raids on our villages have been by young hotheads who openly defy the old chieftan. Somehow, good poet, we can exploit these divisions so I can make good my escape."

Evenke stood near us, her brow wrinkled, trying gamely to follow our rapid conversation.

I bowed my head.

"I have bad news, good lady. Your father, the King of the Northern Chin, has sent me only to ascertain your state of well being. And to let Orkhan know that he must in no way abuse you or the

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king will tear up the treaty. Escape, however, is out of the question."

"But you don't understand!" Boldly, Princess Liao stepped forward and clutched my sleeve. "I *can't* live here amongst these brutal fools. I must return to China. I must return to the people of my own flesh. I must return to the women of the silk guild who need me. I am only a woman, I know, but I have the right to live a life such as any other Chinese is allowed to live. You must help me!"

When I shook my head, she continued to plead. She told me that the barbarian women of the opposing faction had sworn a blood oath against her.

"I will be the first person murdered," she said, "when Orkhan is overthrown. Of course, I cannot talk to my husband about such things. The old barbarian might slay me on the spot, suspecting me of causing the dissension. No, the words must come from you, Poet Meng Li. You must tell him of the plot against him."

"Surely he knows."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But if he knows of the danger to me, maybe he will allow me to return to China with you."

I shook my head. "That's not possible," I said. "The treaty is too important."

She begged me once again to do something.

In the camp below, a group of sentries mounted their ponies in preparation for their nightly reconnaissance.

"We must go," Evenke said.

She pulled her tearful mistress away and the three of us returned to our yurts.

I lay on my mat of rodent skins and tried to sleep. Familiar footsteps entered my tent. Without a word, Evenke pulled off her tunic and her trousers and lay down beside me.

We frolicked as happily as two spring ponies in a grassy glade.

Later, I examined her body. Her breasts were unusually large, although I hadn't allowed them to get in the way during our frolic. And even more strangely, hair poked out of odd spots on her flesh. Under her arms. Along her lower legs.

The left leg had indeed been broken. She also pulled back her lip with her forefinger and showed me a lost tooth.

Both injuries had been suffered during the same mishap. When she'd fallen from a barbarian pony on the day her entire family had been slaughtered and she'd been taken as a slave.

I asked her if she missed her family.

She told me that she hardly remembered them. And now, after living with Princess Liao, she had only one goal in life: to become a cultured lady like her mistress. To become a Chinese.

I tried not to laugh. It was touching, nevertheless. And under-

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standable. Don't all barbarians long to better themselves? But they can never equal the high culture of the Central Kingdom. Then I remembered the fierce-eyed man this afternoon in Orkhan's tent and the barbarian words that had been whispered in my ear. I repeated them to Evenke.

"What do they mean?" I asked.

"Slayer of his brother," she answered.

Before dawn, Evenke slipped silently away.

Orkhan complimented me on my clever poems of the evening before and I, in turn, thanked him for the profuseness of his hospitality. I didn't dare tell him directly that Princess Liao was unhappy and feared for her life; instead I quoted the words of the Great Sage.

The aphorisms didn't sink into Orkhan's thick skull, but he'd heard of Confucius and soon he realized that I was hinting that there might be dissension within his tribe. And that some of the barbarian women might be harboring ill will toward Princess Liao.

Suddenly, as if it were his idea, he called for his guard.

"Round up all the grandmothers," he told them, "and bring them to me immediately."

When the old women were gathered in front of his yurt, Orkhan berated them. Evenke translated for me. He told them they had no right to be jealous of the beautiful Princess Liao, and if he chose to have Chinese ceremonies performed in his yurt, that was his right as chief.

The man known as "Slayer of His Brother" strode through the crowd, not bothering to bow. He pointed his forefinger at Orkhan and shouted out a rapid stream of words.

Everyone in the crowd took an involuntary step backwards.

Orkhan, red-faced, shouted back.

Horsemen approached. Their ponies nuzzled through the mob of milling barbarians. Soon, Slayer of His Brother was surrounded. He reached for his sword but, as fast as a winging bird, a half-dozen bows with iron-tipped arrows were pointing his way.

The Slayer of His Brother slowly took his hand away from the hilt of his sword. I turned to ask Evenke for translation, but she had disappeared into the crowd. A double wooden yoke was brought, placed around the neck and wrists of the Slayer of His Brother, and he was led away.

Orkhan shouted a few more harsh words to his followers and returned to the darkness of his yurt.

That night, another banquet was held, this one more subdued. Luckily, I was not asked to recite poetry and no one noticed when I didn't drink any of the foul-smelling fermented mare's milk.

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Once again, Princess Liao, clad entirely in red silk, performed the sacred ceremonies. Halfway through her performance, a soldier burst into Orkhan's tent, shouting and waving his hand.

All eyes turned to the front. Orkhan listened intently.

Orkhan gazed at the messenger for a moment, as if distracted, and then jumped to his feet. He strapped on his sword and shouted orders at the assembled revelers.

When the man left, I gazed back at Princess Liao. She had pulled her head even deeper into the peaked shawl, as if to retreat from the world around her. She continued her bowing and her lighting of ceremonial fires, her movements more stilted somehow. Was she frightened by the activity swirling around her?

I strode outside the yurt.

The camp was in pandemonium. People ran every which way, brandishing swords and pikes and bows and arrows.

A few yards away I saw a double yoke lying on the ground, its iron hasps cracked in two. I retreated back inside the large yurt. The lady of the red silk was gone.

My suspicions were correct. The Slayer of His Brother had indeed escaped. And when he did so, accusations of collaboration with a traitor flew through the camp. Shouting started, and then bloodshed, until the entire clan was in open revolt.

Orkhan and his supporters fought bravely, but sometime after nightfall I stumbled upon his body. By the light of burning yurts, I could see that a pool of thick gore lay beneath Orkhan's head. His throat had been cut.

I retreated into the darkness of my yurt, standing in the center, holding my dagger straight out in front of me, starting at every sound. Finally, the fighting quieted down and the first rays of dawn peeked through cracks in the felt tent.

First, I went to the tent of Princess Liao.

Nothing was left of it but charred rubble.

None of the barbarians paid any attention to me. Everyone was too exhausted, subdued by last night's slaughter, to protest my actions.

I realized that I could now comply with Princess Liao's wishes. Her husband, Orkhan, was dead. That meant that the treaty with her father, the King of the Northern Chin, was null and void. And therefore, I was now free to take Princess Liao back to China.

If I could find her remains.

I grabbed a stick and poked through the burnt wood. It took almost an hour, but finally I found the bronze incense bowl used in the *li* ceremonies. Clutching it were blackened bones. I pried the bones loose and placed them inside the bronze vessel. When I

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found her teeth I carefully counted them and placed them, one by one, into the urn. One molar was twice as large as the next. Another bone seemed queer to me. I wrapped it in the red scarf that the ladies of the silk guild had given to me and shoved it deep into the pockets of my cloak.

Someone shouted. I turned. A horseman, motioning for me to come out of the rubble.

Was this it? Would I be slaughtered as so many had been last night?

The barbarian squinted at me as I approached. Then he crooked his dirty finger and bade me follow him through the half-destroyed encampment.

I did.

He took me before the man I had known only as the Slayer of his Brother.

His name was Temujin. That much I understood. But he spoke only a few coarse words of Chinese, obviously picked up during his raids against our peace-loving village folk. He made me to understand that he was now the chief.

Evenke was the translator I needed, but she hadn't appeared.

Using a burnt human bone, Temujin scratched a map in the dirt. He outlined China and the Great Wall and the lands of the barbarians. Then, with his bare hand, he rubbed out the great wall. He used his finger to redraw the boundaries of the barbarian lands to include all the lands known as the Middle Kingdom.

He pointed at his handiwork and gazed into my eyes.

I nodded that I understood.

This upstart, this brutal barbarian chieftan known as the Slayer of His Brother, was declaring war on China.

Then he pointed south, back to whence I had come, and he barked orders to his men.

Within minutes, my gray mare was brought to me, already laden with provisions. I tied the bronze urn containing Princess Liao's remains to the leather bundles. Then I hopped aboard and rode south, away from the staring eyes of the murderer known as Temujin.

The mare died along the way.

Still, I carried the bronze urn. Princess Liao deserved to be buried in the soil of the Central Kingdom alongside the bones of her ancestors.

Burning sun beat down.

I breathed dirt, laughing to myself at my fall from high position. Vultures scuttled near.

Unbidden, a great poem of love and war and sacrifice filled my

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brain like a burning star. If only I had a brush and ink and parchment. If only I could put this epic down on paper. I would be immortal!

I laughed again. No such luck. The vultures skitted closer.

Their eyes were like greedy red beads. I lost consciousness.

I came to in the back of a cart. A mounted soldier in a leather helmet hovered nearby. He leaned down and spoke to me in Chinese.

"What is your honorable name?"

"Li," I told him. "Called Meng."

The soldier's eyes widened. He spurred his horse and galloped forward, shouting for his captain.

Once again, I closed my eyes. Darkness descended.

At the royal court, I reported all I had seen. I told of the death of Orkhan and the ascendency of Temujin. Bearded chins nodded gravely.

They'd heard of this man, the Slayer of His Brother, and considered him dangerous.

"He's declared war on China," I said.

Everyone laughed, as if I'd told a great joke. I stared about sheepishly and bowed once again to the king, wishing I could earn such a heartfelt reaction when I recited my poetry.

King Shi Chong-wan leaned forward on his throne. "What of Princess Liao?"

I hoisted the bronze urn, stepped forward, bowed to my knees, and placed it before him.

"Amongst the barbarians," I said, "she conducted herself at all times like a princess, teaching them the meaning of high culture. And she died an honorable death, attempting to protect her husband Orkhan, even though he was a man of whom she personally disapproved. She was truly, sire, a filial daughter and a loyal wife, to be held by all in high esteem."

The king's eyes moistened. Fighting back the show of weakness, he leaned back in his throne and shouted for his advisors. They approached and stood rigidly at attention.

"Prepare for the funeral of Princess Liao. It will be the grandest in the history of the Northern Chin. And make sure that the entire city is festooned in red silk!"

Fine undergarments rustled against my flesh.

It was good to be bathed and scented again, with fresh silk clothing caressing my battered body.

And it felt good to be alive. Especially after the solemn funeral honoring Princess Liao, committing her to the care of her illustrious ancestors.

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But during the bowing and the burning of incense and the clanging of gongs, I felt like an imposter. An imposter who wasn't convinced of the propriety of the ceremony. Now that I was out of danger, I could look back on what had happened in the barbarian lands and evaluate the circumstances with a clear mind. I could see clues. Evidence of things happening that weren't what they appeared to be. As the day wore on, my suspicions grew. Until I had no choice but to act on them.

I strode up the stone steps of the hills surrounding the city, gazing down now at the thousands of straw-thatched roofs below me.

A wooden arch was inscribed with engraved characters. "Silk Guild. Unauthorized Entry Prohibited."

The Central Kingdom had long been the world's only source for high-quality silk. By imperial decree, the secrets of the production of silk were protected from the inquisitive eyes of foreigners upon pain of death. The women of the silk guild took their duties seriously.

Three of them, broad-shouldered and wearing only wool tunics, blocked my path.

"State your business," one of them said.

"I am Meng Li," I replied. "Returned from the land of the barbarians."

They glared at me without acknowledgement.

"There is someone whom I wish to talk to. Someone who I know is here."

"And who would that be?"

"Princess Liao."

The woman's mouth dropped open. "You must be mad."

"Not mad," I said. "Will you allow me to pass?"

"Never."

I took a step forward but the three stout women raised their fists, assuming a fighting stance. A lover of literature like myself would be no match for these ferocious women. Besides, I'd lately had my fill of violence. Instead of fighting, I reached into the cuff of my sleeve and pulled out two molars.

"Give these to your mistress," I said. "I'm sure that after she sees them, she will want to talk to me."

One of the women took the human teeth in her open palm, crinkled her nose, and turned and trotted up the stone steps.

Twenty minutes later she returned.

I was allowed into the ancient Guild of Silk.

Black hair was piled high atop her head and her pale skin had been burnt red by the sun. Still, she looked elegant in her red silk gown embroidered with gold and silver dragons, snarling and flying

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toward the sun. She sat on a plump blue cushion and motioned toward me with her open palm.

"Tea?"

One of the Silk Guild ladies placed a tray in front of me.

"How gracious of you."

I poured myself a cup. Clearly, in these quarters men were expected to pull their own weight. The hot red fluid strengthened me.

"Truly, Good Lady, I am so happy to see you alive."

Princess Liao nodded her head.

"And your funeral today was magnificent. The most elaborate any living person has ever witnessed. You should be proud that your father loves you so dearly."

She nodded again. "I am."

"But he would be so much happier if he knew that you were alive."

"That," she replied, "he must never know."

"But why?"

"Because I would shame him. If he knew that I allowed my husband to be murdered at the hands of rebels, our royal line would be disgraced."

"I think it's more than that," I said. "I think you planned the entire thing."

She waited, not denying what I had just said.

"That's why you wrote the letter sending for me," I continued. "For I, the poet Meng Li, was to be your witness. I was to be the one who returned your bones as proof that you were dead."

Princess Liao reached for her cup and sipped daintily at her tea.

"You planned the rebellion," I said. "Probably in league with Temujin. Your bargain was that you would assist him from within Orkhan's personal guard while Temujin, in return, would allow you to escape when the time came.

"Normally," I continued, "a return to China would not be feasible. Your father would never allow it. Broken vows and the subsequent loss of face would be too damaging to the royal family. So you had to fake your death. But even with a fake death, where would you hide?"

I waved my hand to indicate the homes and factories in the tightly packed district known as the Guild of Silk.

"But you had a place. The ladies of the Silk Guild revered you. While in China, you had elevated their status to a position of high esteem, pointing out that their product brought thousands of taels of gold each year to China from the silk-hungry foreigners. You protected the Silk Guild in time of distress and now it was time for the Silk Guild to protect you. If you could just fake your death convincingly, you would have the perfect place to hide for the rest of your life."

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Princess Liao's eyes were cast demurely at the wood-slat floor. Finally, her lids fluttered and she gazed up at me.

"How did you know?"

"Evenke," I said. "When the messenger burst into Orkhan's tent, she took your place in the *li* ceremony. She was awkward, of course, but enchanted by the opportunity to wear a gown of red silk and perform the ancient *li* ceremonies of China."

Princess Liao smiled.

"Earlier, Evenke had shown me her missing tooth," I said. "I suspected right away when I found the remains that they were hers. But possibly you had a tooth missing also. And too much danger was swirling around me. I couldn't think clearly at the time. Later, what convinced me was this."

I reached inside my tunic and pulled out the bundle wrapped in red silk. I lay it between us and unwrapped it. A human calf bone rolled out.

"Evenke limped," I said. "She had broken her leg as a child. This confirmed to me that you had switched places with her."

Princess Liao's almond eyes widened slightly.

"But you carried her bones back to China anyway."

"As you wished. Certainly you knew that a poet such as I would feel compelled to protect the remains, at least as long as there was any thought that they might belong to royalty. And how could I contradict your implied wishes? If I was wrong, and these bones didn't belong to Evenke, my mistake might have cost me my life."

Princess Liao nodded, staring into the depths of her teacup. Finally, she spoke.

"I had a right to live my life as a Chinese," she said. "Who is my father to order me to live with barbarians? Am I just a thing that can be bartered back and forth? I am a person of royal blood! He had no right to do that to me."

"It was your duty," I said.

Her eyes flared in anger. "And I have fulfilled that duty! Orkhan is dead. There is no more treaty to be maintained."

I spoke softly. "Temujin is an ambitious man. He could cause much trouble for the Central Kingdom."

"No. He will not. Don't you think I planned that also? I will control him. He will not harm my father's kingdom."

This time, it was my mouth that dropped open. Amazed at her temerity. However, I quickly regained my composure.

"Control a murderous barbarian?" I asked. "Forgive me, lady, but even for one of your great intelligence, this might not be possible."

"It is possible," she answered. Then she rubbed her belly. Red silk rustled beneath her hand. "I will bear his child."

"His child?"

"Do not look at me like that. I was not an ordinary wife with the

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same ordinary duties to her husband that other wives have. My primary duty was to the Central Kingdom. Yes, I wanted to return to my people and live amongst the Chinese, but I couldn't let my selfish desires cause suffering for my people. So Temujin had to be controlled."

"And now you believe that he will not attack China because of you?"

"He will not. Because of his son who sleeps here within my womb. He will hold his attack until the boy is of age. Then he will assist in placing him in his rightful place. On the throne of the Northern Chin."

"Temujin promised you this?"

"He promised. And then we will be one nation and we Chinese will civilize the barbarians and there will be peace."

I finished the last of my tea, anxious to leave the presence of someone so blinded by ambition. But one last question lingered. A question I could not resist asking.

"But what of Evenke?"

"What of her?"

"You had her murdered."

"Oh, you foolish man."

Her flippant answer enraged me. Even though Princess Liao was royal, who gave her the right to murder such a fine young woman as Evenke? But revenge was at hand. Normally, to kill a princess would be the greatest of folly. But to murder one that was already dead? That might be possible. Especially when the women of the Silk Guild wouldn't dare reveal the truth.

I fondled the leather hilt of the dagger hidden within my cloak.

Princess Liao continued her explanation. "Would you call it murder to carry out Evenke's wishes?"

My grip tightened around the dagger. "Her wishes? She wished to have herself burnt to death?"

"Of course not. But that was the price she had to pay."

"Pay for what?"

"To become a Chinese."

I was startled, but as Princess Liao continued to explain, it began to make sense. Or maybe it was just my exhaustion from the long journey from the land of the barbarians. Or the two more pots of tea we drank as I let loose my grip on the dagger and we gossiped into the night.

When I walked back down the stone steps leading away from the Guild of Silk, a red sunset glimmered over the city, lighting the parapets of the Great Wall.

Evenke had wanted to become a Chinese. Of course that was impossible. Except in death. If she died for China and her bones

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were carried back to the soil of China to be interred in a great ceremony, and if Princess Liao herself and the ladies of the Silk Guild worshipped her remains as if she were a revered ancestor, then she would become a Chinese. A member of a great family. Presiding in heaven.

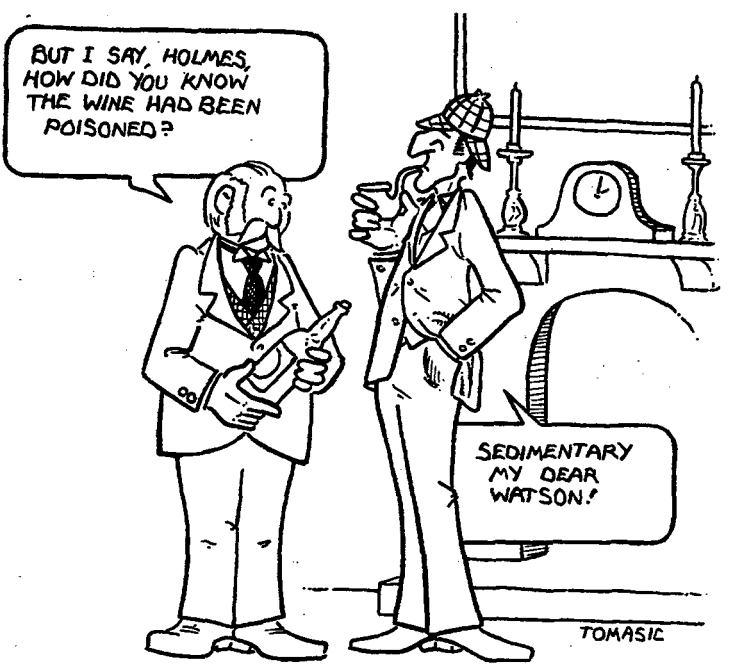
Maybe it seems strange to those of us who have been educated in the rational teachings of the classics. But now that I have wandered amongst barbarians, their desire to become civilized, to become part of the Central Kingdom, no longer seems strange to me. Would it be preferable to live in superstition and squalor? Or to die as a revered ancestor? An easy question to answer for a slave girl without a family. One whose only future was to be traded from barbarian to barbarian.

I stared south, at the verdant fields of China, glowing now in the fading light, and then looked north toward the trackless wastelands. I remembered the eyes of Temujin. The eyes of the man who flayed Orkhan the Great.

They were dangerous eyes. Could he be believed? Or would he return even sooner to reclaim Princess Liao and the child that would be his son?

I didn't trust him. And I didn't trust his ambition.

Princess Liao told me that he had already picked out the name he would use once he became leader of all the nomadic tribes. He would be called "Khan," which means "conqueror" in the barbarian tongue. And his first name would be "Genghis," which means "of the entire world." ●



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The Wink

by Ruth Rendell

Ruth Rendell is one of the great masters of the series detective novel. Says her American publisher: "With her Wexford novels she has added layers of depth, realism, and unease to the classic English mystery." Those three words —depth, realism, and unease—describe perfectly what she's added to the short psychological suspense story as well. And nowhere is it more apparent than in this subtle tale of a silent victim. †

The woman in reception gave her directions. Go through the day room, then the double doors at the back, turn left, and Elsie's in the third room on the right. Unless she's in the day room.

Elsie wasn't, but the Beast was. Jean always called him that, she had never known his name. He was sitting with the others watching television. A semicircle of chairs was arranged in front of the television, mostly armchairs but some wheelchairs, and some of the old people had fallen asleep. He was in a wheelchair and he was awake, staring at the screen where celebrities were taking part in a game show.

Ten years had passed since she had last seen him, but she knew him, changed and aged though he was. He must be well over eighty. Seeing him was always a shock, but seeing him in here was a surprise. A not unpleasant surprise. He must be in that chair because he couldn't walk. He had been brought low, his life was coming to an end.

She knew what he would do when he saw her. He always did. But possibly he wouldn't see her, he wouldn't turn round. The game show would continue to hold his attention. She walked as softly as she could, short of tiptoeing, round the edge of the semicircle. Her mistake was to look back just before she reached the double doors. His eyes were on her and he did what he always did. He winked.

Jean turned sharply away. She went down the corridor and found Elsie's room, the third on the right. Elsie, too, was asleep, sitting in an armchair by the window. Jean put the flowers she had brought on the bed and sat down on the only other chair, an

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upright one without arms. Then she got up again and drew the curtain a little way across to keep the sunshine off Elsie's face.

Elsie had been at Sweetling Manor for two weeks, and Jean knew she would never come out again. She would die here—and why not? It was clean and comfortable and everything was done for you and probably it was ridiculous to feel as Jean did, that she would prefer anything to being here, including being helpless and old and starving and finally dying alone.

They were the same age, she and Elsie, but she felt younger and thought she looked it. They had always known each other, had been at school together, had been each other's bridesmaids. Well, Elsie had been her matron of honour, having been married a year by then. It was Elsie she had gone to the pictures with that evening, Elsie and another girl whose name she couldn't remember. She remembered the film, though. It had been Deanna Durbin in *Three Smart Girls.* Sixty years ago.

When Elsie woke up she would ask her what the other girl was called. Christine? Kathleen? Never mind. Did Elsie know the Beast was in here? Jean remembered then that Elsie didn't know the Beast, had never heard what happened that night, no one had, she had told no one. It was different in those days, you couldn't tell because you would get the blame. Somehow, ignorant though she was, she had known that even then.

Ignorant. They all were, she and Elsie and the girl called Christine or Kathleen. Or perhaps they were just afraid. Afraid of what people would say, would think of them. Those were the days of blame, of good behaviour expected from everyone, of taking responsibility, and often punishment, for one's own actions. You put up with things and you got on with things. Complaining got you nowhere.

Over the years there had been extraordinary changes. You were no longer blamed or punished, you got something called empathy. In the old days, what the Beast did would have been her fault. She must have led him on, encouraged him. Now it was a crime, *his* crime. She read about it in the papers, saw about things called helplines on television, and counselling and specially trained women police officers. This was to avoid your being marked for life, traumatised, though you could never forget.

That was true, that last part, though she had forgotten for weeks on end, months. And then, always, she had seen him again. It came of living in the country, in a small town; it came of her living there and his going on living there. Once she saw him in a shop, once out in the street, another time he got on a bus as she was getting off it. He always winked. He didn't say anything, just looked at her and winked.

Elsie had looked like Deanna Durbin. The resemblance was quite marked. They were about the same age, born in the same

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year. Jean remembered how they had talked about it, she and Elsie and Christine-Kathleen, as they left the cinema and the others walked with her to the bus stop. Elsie wanted to know what you had to do to get a screen test and the other girl said it would help to be in Hollywood, not Yorkshire. Both of them lived in the town, five minutes' walk away, and Elsie said she could stay the night if she wanted. But there was no way of letting her parents know. Elsie's parents had a phone, but hers didn't.

Deanna Durbin was still alive, Jean had read somewhere. She wondered if she still looked like Elsie or if she had had her face lifted and her hair dyed and gone on diets. Elsie's face was plump and soft, very wrinkled about the eyes, and her hair was white and thin. She smiled faintly in her sleep and gave a little snore. Jean moved her chair closer and took hold of Elsie's hand. That made the smile come back, but Elsie didn't wake.

The Beast had come along in his car about ten minutes after the girls had gone and Jean was certain the bus wasn't coming. It was the last bus and she hadn't known what to do. This had happened before, the driver just hadn't turned up and had got the sack for it, but that hadn't made the bus come. On that occasion she had gone to Elsie's and Elsie's mother had phoned her parents' next-door neighbours. She thought that if she did that a second time and put Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings to all that trouble, her dad would probably stop her going to the pictures ever again.

It wasn't dark. At midsummer it wouldn't get dark till after ten. If it had been, she mightn't have gone with the Beast. Of course, he didn't seem like a Beast then, but young, a boy really, and handsome and quite nice. And it was only five miles. Mr. Rawlings was always saying five miles was nothing, he used to walk five miles to school every day and five miles back. But she couldn't face the walk and, besides, she wanted a ride in a car. It would only be the third time she had ever been in one. Still, she would have refused his offer if he hadn't said what he had when she told him where she lived.

"You'll know the Rawlings, then. Mrs. Rawlings is my sister."

It wasn't true, but it sounded true. She got in beside him. The car wasn't really his, it belonged to the man he worked for; he was a chauffeur, but she found that out a lot later.

"Lovely evening," he said. "You been gallivanting?"

"I've been to the pictures," she said.

After a couple of miles he turned a little way down a lane and stopped the car outside a derelict cottage. It looked as if no one could possibly live there, but he said he had to see someone, it would only take a minute and she could come, too. By now it was dusk, but there were no lights on in the cottage. She remembered he was Mrs. Rawlings's brother. There must have been a good ten

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years between them, but that hadn't bothered her. Her own sister was ten years older than she was.

She followed him up the path, which was overgrown with weeds and brambles. Instead of going to the front door, he led her round the back where old apple trees grew among waist-high grass. The back of the house was a ruin, half its rear wall tumbled down.

"There's no one here," she said.

He didn't say anything. He took hold of her and pulled her down in the long grass, one hand pressed hard over her mouth. She hadn't known anyone could be so strong. He took his hand away to pull her clothes off and she screamed, but the screaming was just a reflex, a release of fear, and otherwise useless. There was no one to hear. What he did was rape. She knew that now—well, had known it soon after it happened, only no one called it that then. Nobody spoke of it. Nowadays the word was on everyone's lips. Nine out of ten television series were about it. Rape, the crime against women. Rape, that these days you went into court and talked about. You went to self-defence classes to stop it happening to you. You attended groups and shared your experience with other victims.

At first, she had been most concerned to find out if he had injured her. Torn her, broken bones. But there was nothing like that. Because she was all right and he was gone, she stopped crying. She heard the car start up and then move away. Walking home wasn't exactly painful, more a stiff, achey business, rather the way she had felt the day after she and Elsie had been learning to do the splits. She had to walk anyway, she had no choice. As it was, her father was in a rage, wanting to know what time she thought this was.

"Anything could have happened to you," her mother said.

Something had. She had been raped. She went up to bed so they wouldn't see she couldn't stop shivering. She didn't sleep at all that night. In the morning she told herself it could have been worse, at least she wasn't dead. It never crossed her mind to say anything to anyone about what had happened; she was too ashamed, too afraid of what they would think. It was past, she kept telling herself, it was all over.

One thing worried her most. A baby. Suppose she had a baby. Never in all her life was she so relieved about anything, so happy, as when she saw that first drop of blood run down the inside of her leg a day early. She shouted for joy. She was all right! The blood cleansed her and now no one need ever know.

Trauma? That was the word they used nowadays. It meant a scar. There was no scar that you could see and no scar she could feel in her body, but it was years before she would let a man come near her. Afterwards she was glad about that, glad she had waited, that she hadn't met someone else before Kenneth. But at the time, she thought about what had happened every day; she relived what

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had happened, the shock and the pain and the dreadful fear, and in her mind she called the man who had done that to her the Beast.

Eight years went by and she saw him again. She was out with Kenneth, he had just been demobbed from the Air Force and they were walking down the High Street arm-in-arm. Kenneth had asked her to marry him and they were going to buy the engagement ring. It was a big jewellers they went to, with several aisles. The Beast was in a different aisle, quite a long way away, on some errand for his employer, she supposed, but she saw him and he saw her. He winked.

He winked, just as he had ten minutes ago in the day room. Jean shut her eyes.

When she opened them again, Elsie was awake.

"How long have you been there, dear?"

"Not long," Jean said.

"Are those flowers for me? You know how I love freesias. We'll get someone to put them in water. I don't have to do a thing in here, don't lift a finger. I'm a lady of leisure."

"Elsie," said Jean, "what was the name of that girl we went to the pictures with when we saw *Three Smart Girls?*"

"What?"

"It was nineteen thirty-eight. In the summer."

"I don't know, I shall have to think. My memory's not what it was. Bob used to say I looked like Deanna Durbin."

"We all said you did."

"Constance, her name was. We called her Connie."

"So we did," said Jean.

Elsie began talking of the girls they had been at school with. She could remember all their Christian names and most of their surnames. Jean found a vase, filled it with water, and put the freesias into it because they showed signs of wilting. Her engagement ring still fitted on her finger, though it was a shade tighter. How worried she had been that Kenneth would be able to tell she wasn't a virgin! They said men could always tell. But of course, when the time came, he couldn't. It was just another old wives' tale.

Elsie, who already had her first baby, had worn rose-coloured taffeta at their wedding. And her husband had been Kenneth's best man. John was born nine months later and the twins eighteen months after that. There was a longer gap before Anne arrived, but still she had had her hands full. That was the time, when the children were little, that she thought less about the Beast and what had happened than at any other time in her life. She forgot him for months on end. Anne was just four when she saw him again.

She was meeting the other children from school. They hadn't got a car then, it was years before they got a car. On the way to the school, they were going to the shop to buy Anne a new pair of

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shoes. The Red Lion was just closing for the afternoon. The Beast came out of the public bar, not too steady on his feet, and he almost bumped into her. She said, "Do you mind?" before she saw who it was. He stepped back, looked into her face, and winked. She was outraged. For two pins she'd have told Kenneth the whole tale that evening. But of course she couldn't. Not now.

"I don't know what you mean about your memory," she said to Elsie. "You've got a wonderful memory."

Elsie smiled. It was the same pretty teenager's smile, only they didn't use that word teenager then. You were just a person between twelve and twenty. "What do you think of this place, then?"

"It's lovely," said Jean. "I'm sure you've done the right thing."

Elsie talked some more about the old days and the people they'd known and then Jean kissed her goodbye and said she'd come back next week.

"Use the shortcut next time," said Elsie. "Through the garden and in by the French windows next door."

"I'll remember."

She wasn't going to leave that way, though. She went back down the corridor and hesitated outside the day-room door. The last time she'd seen the Beast, before *this* time, they were both growing old. Kenneth was dead. John was a grandfather himself, though a young one, the twins were joint directors of a prosperous business in Australia, and Anne was a surgeon in London. Jean had never learned to drive, and the car was given up when Kenneth died. She was waiting at that very bus stop, the one where he had picked her up all those years before. The bus came and he got off it, an old man with white hair, his face yellowish and wrinkled. But she knew him, she would have known him anywhere. He gave her one of his rude stares and he winked. That time it was an exaggerated, calculated wink, the whole side of his face screwed up and his eye squeezed shut.

She pushed open the day-room door. The television was still on but he wasn't there. His wheelchair was empty. Then she saw him. He was being brought back from the bathroom, she supposed. A nurse held him tightly by one arm. The other rested heavily on the padded top of a crutch. His legs, in pyjama trousers, were half-buckled and on his face was an expression of agony as, wincing with pain, he took small tottering steps.

Jean looked at him. She stared into his tormented face and his eyes met hers. Then she winked. She winked at him as he had winked at her that last time, and she saw what she had never thought to see happen to an old person. A rich dark blush spread across his withered face. He turned away his eyes. Jean tripped lightly across the room towards the exit, like a sixteen-year-old. ●

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The Beach Butler

by Ruth Rendell

If this last in our trio of Rendell short stories leaves you thirsting for more, don't despair. We'll have another tale for you in March, two in April, and a complete Rendell novella in the September/October issue. Fortunately, the author also has a full list of books just out, or about to come out: See *A Sleeping Life, Shake Hands Forever,* and *Harm Done,* all from Vintage Crime. †

The woman was thin and stringy, burned dark brown, in a white bikini that was too brief. Her hair, which had stopped looking like hair long ago, was a pale dry fluff. She came out of the sea, out of the latest crashing breaker, waving her arms and crying, screaming of some kind of loss. Alison, in her solitary recliner, under her striped hood (hired at $6 a morning or $10 a whole day) watched her emerge, watched people crowd about her, heard complaints made in angry voices, but not what was said.

As always, the sky was a cloudless blue, the sea a deeper colour. The Pacific, but not peaceable. It only looked calm. Not far from the shore a great swell would bulge out of the sea, rise to a crest, and crash on whoever happened to be there at the time, in a cascade of overwhelming, stunning, irresistible water, so that you fell over before you knew what was happening. Just such a wave had crashed on the woman in the white bikini. When she had struggled to her feet she had found herself somehow damaged or bereft.

Alone, knowing nobody, Alison could see no one to ask. She put her head back on the pillow, adjusted her sunglasses, returned to her book. She had read no more than a paragraph when she heard his gentle voice asking her if there was anything she required. Could he get her anything?

When first she heard his—well, what? His title?—when first she heard he was called the beach butler, it had made her laugh, she could hardly believe it. She thought of telling people at home and watching their faces. The beach butler. It conjured up a picture of

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an elderly man with a paunch wearing a white dinner jacket with striped trousers and pointed patent shoes like Hercule Poirot. Agustin wasn't like that. He was young, handsome. He was wary and polite, and he wore shorts and white trainers. His T-shirts were always snow-white and immaculate, he must get through several a day. She wondered who washed them. A mother? A wife?

He stood there, smiling, holding the pad on which he wrote down orders. She couldn't really afford to order anything; she hadn't known the package didn't include drinks and midday meals and extras like this recliner and hood. On the other hand, she could hardly keep pretending she never wanted a drink.

"A Diet Coke, then," she said.

"Something to eat, ma'am?"

It must be close on lunchtime. "Maybe some crisps." She corrected herself. "I mean, chips."

Agustin wrote something on his pad. He spoke fairly good English, but only, she suspected, when food was the subject. Still, she would try.

"What was wrong with the lady?"

"The lady?"

"The one who was screaming."

"Ah. She lose her . . ." He resorted to miming, holding up his hands, making a ring with his fingers round his wrist. "The ocean take her—these things."

"Bracelet, do you mean? Rings?"

"All those. The ocean take. Bracelet, rings, these . . ." He put his hands to the lobes of his ears.

Alison shook her head, smiling. She had seen someone go into the sea wearing sunglasses and come out having lost them to the tide. But jewellery . . . !

"One Diet Coke, one chips," he said. "Suite number, please?"

"Six-oh-seven—I mean, six-zero-seven."

She signed the chit. He passed on to the couple sitting in chairs under a striped umbrella. It was all couples here, couples or families. When they decided to come, she and Liz, they hadn't expected that. They'd expected young unattached people. Then Liz had got appendicitis and had to cancel and Alison had come alone; she'd paid, she couldn't afford not to come, and she'd even been excited at the prospect. Mostly Americans, the travel agent had said, and she had imagined Tom Cruise look-alikes. American men were all tall, and in the movies they were all handsome. On the long flight over she had speculated about meeting them. Well, about meeting one.

But there were no men. Or, rather, there were plenty of men of all ages, and they were tall enough and good-looking enough, but they were all married or with partners or girlfriends and most of

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them were fathers of families. Alison had never seen so many children all at once. The evenings were quiet, the place gradually becoming deserted, as all these parents disappeared into their suites—there were no rooms here, only suites—to be with their sleeping children. By ten the band stopped playing, for the children must be allowed to sleep; the restaurant staff brought the tables indoors, the bar closed.

She had walked down to the beach that first evening expecting lights, people strolling, even a barbecue. It had been dark and silent, no one about but the beach butler, cleaning from the sand the day's litter: the drinks cans, the crisp bags, and the cigarette butts.

He brought her Diet Coke and her crisps. He smiled at her, his teeth as white as his T-shirt. She had a sudden urge to engage him in conversation, to get him to sit in a chair beside her and talk to her, so as not to be alone. She thought of asking him if he had had his lunch, if he'd have a drink with her, but by the time the words were formulated he had passed on. He had gone up to the group where sat the woman who had screamed.

Alison had been taught by her mother and father and her swimming teacher at school that you must never go into sea or pool until two hours have elapsed after eating. But last week she had read in a magazine that this theory is now old hat, you may go swimming as soon as you like after eating. Besides, a packet of crisps was hardly a meal. She was very hot, it was the hottest time of the day.

Looking at herself in one of the many mirrors in her suite, she thought she looked as good in her black bikini as any woman there. Better than most. Certainly thinner, and she would get even thinner because she couldn't afford to eat much. It was just that so many on the beach were younger than she, even the ones with two or three children. Or they looked younger. When she thought like that panic rushed upon her, a seizure of panic that gripped her like physical pain. And the words which came with it were "old" and "poor." She walked down to the water's edge. Showing herself off, hoping they were watching her. Then she walked quickly into the clear, warm water.

The incoming wave broke at her feet. By the time the next one had swollen, reared up, and collapsed in a roar of spray, she was out beyond its range. There were sharks, but they didn't come within a thousand yards of the beach and she wasn't afraid. She swam, floated on the water, swam again. A man and a woman, both wearing sunglasses, swam out together, embraced, began a passionate kissing while they trod water. Alison looked away and up towards the hotel, anywhere but at them.

In the travel brochure, the hotel had looked very different, more golden than red, and the mountains behind it less stark. It hadn't

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looked like what it was, a brick-red building in a brick-red desert. The lawns around it weren't exactly artificial, but they were composed of the kind of grass that never grew and so never had to be cut. Watering took place at night. No one knew where the water came from, because there were no rivers or reservoirs and it never rained. Brilliantly coloured flowers—red, pink, purple, orange—hung from every balcony, and the huge tubs were filled with hibiscus and bird-of-paradise. But outside the grounds, the only thing that grew was cactus, some like swords and some like plates covered with prickles. And through the desert went the white road that came from the airport and must go on to somewhere else.

Alison let the swell carry her in, judged the pace of the waves, let one break ahead of her, then ran ahead through the shallows, just in time before the next one came. The couple who had been kissing had both lost their sunglasses. She saw them complaining and gesticulating to Agustin as if he were responsible for the strength of the sea.

The tide was going out. Four little boys and three girls began building a sandcastle where the sand was damp and firm. She didn't like them, they were a nuisance, the last thing she wanted was for them to talk to her or like her, but they made her think that if she didn't hurry up she would never have children. It would be too late, it was getting later every minute. She dried herself and took the used towel to drop it into the bin by the beach butler's pavilion. Agustin was handing out snorkelling equipment to the best-looking man on the beach and his beautiful girlfriend. Well, the best-looking man after Agustin.

He waved to her, said, "Have a nice day, ma'am."

The hours passed slowly. With Liz there it would have been very different, despite the lack of available men. When you have someone to talk to you can't think so much. Alison would have preferred not to keep thinking all the time but she couldn't help herself. She thought about being alone and about apparently being the only person in the hotel who was alone. She thought about what this holiday was costing, some of it already paid for, but not all.

When she had arrived they had asked for an imprint of her credit card and she had given it, she didn't know how to refuse. She imagined a picture of her pale blue-and-grey credit card filling a computer screen and every drink she had and slice of pizza she ate and every towel she used and recliner she sat in and video she watched depositing a red spot on its pastel surface, until the whole card was filled up with scarlet. Until it burst or rang bells and the computer printed "no, no, no" across the screen.

She lay down on the enormous bed and slept. The air conditioning kept the temperature at the level of an average January day in England and she had to cover herself up with the thick quilt they

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called a comforter. It wasn't much comfort but was slippery and cold to the touch. Outside, the sun blazed onto the balcony and flamed on the glass so that looking at the windows was impossible. Sleeping like this kept Alison from sleeping at night, but there was nothing else to do. She woke in time to see the sunset. The sun seemed to sink into the sea or be swallowed up by it, like a red-hot iron plunged in water. She could almost hear it fizz. A little wind swayed the thin palm trees.

After dinner, pasta and salad and fruit salad and a glass of house wine, the cheapest things on the menu, after sitting by the pool with the coffee that was free—they endlessly refilled one's cup—she went down to the beach. She hardly knew why. Perhaps it was because at this time of the day the hotel became unbearable with everyone departing to their rooms, carrying exhausted children or hand-in-hand or arms round each other's waists, so surely off to make love it was indecent.

She made her way along the pale paths, under the palms, between the tubs of ghost-pale flowers, now drained of colour. Down the steps to the newly cleaned sand, the newly swept red rocks. Recliners and chairs were all stacked away, umbrellas furled, hoods folded up. It was warm and still, the air smelling of nothing, not even of salt. Down at the water's edge, in the pale moonlight, the beach butler was walking slowly along, pushing ahead of him something that looked, from where she stood, like a small vacuum cleaner.

She walked towards him. Not a vacuum cleaner, a metal detector.

"You're looking for the jewellery people lose," she said.

He looked at her, smiled. "We never find." He put his hand into the pocket of his shorts. "Find this only."

Small change, most of it American, a handful of sandy nickels, dimes, and quarters.

"Do you get to keep it?"

"This money? Of course. Who can say who has lost this money?"

"But jewellery, if you found that, would it be yours?"

He switched off the detector. "I finish now." He seemed to consider, began to laugh. From that laughter she suddenly understood so much, she was amazed at her own intuitive powers. His laughter, the tone of it, the incredulous note in it, told her his whole life; his poverty, the wonder of having this job, the value to him of five dollars in small change, his greed, his fear, his continuing amazement at the attitudes of these rich people. A lot to read into a laugh, but she knew she had got it right. And at the same time she was overcome by a need for him that included pity and empathy and desire. She forgot about having to be careful, forgot that credit card.

"Is there any drink in the pavilion?"

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The laughter had stopped. His head a little on one side, he was smiling at her. "There is wine, yes. There is rum."

"I'd like to buy you a drink. Can we do that?"

He nodded. She had supposed the pavilion was closed and he would have to unlock a door and roll up a shutter, but it was still open. It was open for the families who never came after six o'clock. He took two glasses down from a shelf.

"I don't want wine," she said. "I want the rum."

He poured tequila into their glasses and soda into hers. His he drank down at one gulp and poured himself a refill.

"Suite number, please," he said.

It gave her a small unpleasant shock to be asked. "Six-zero-seven," she said, not caring to read what it cost, and signed the chit. He took it from her, touching her fingers with his fingers. She asked him where he lived.

"In the village. It is five minutes."

"You have a car?"

He started laughing again. He came out of the pavilion carrying the tequila bottle. When he had pulled down the shutters and locked them and locked the door, he took her hand and said, "Come." She noticed he had stopped calling her ma'am. The hand that held hers went round her waist and pulled her closer to him. The path led up among the red rocks, under pine trees that looked black by night. Underfoot was pale dry sand. She had thought he would take her to the village but instead he pulled her down onto the sand in the deep shadows.

His kisses were perfunctory. He threw up her long skirt and pulled down her tights. It was all over in a few minutes. She put up her arms to hold him, expecting a real kiss now and perhaps a flattering word or two. He sat up and lit a cigarette. Although it was two years since she had smoked, she would have liked one, too, but she was afraid to ask him, he was so poor, he probably rationed his cigarettes.

"I go home now," he said, and he stubbed out the cigarette into the sand he had cleaned of other people's butts.

"Do you walk?"

He surprised her. "I take the bus. In poor countries are always many buses." He had learned that. She had a feeling he had said it many times before.

Why did she have to ask? She was half-afraid of him now, but his attraction for her was returning. "Shall I see you again?"

"Of course. On the beach. Diet Coke and chips, right?" Again he began laughing. His sense of humour was not of a kind she had come across before. He turned to her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Tomorrow night, sure. Here. Same time, same place."

Not a very satisfactory encounter, she thought as she went back

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to the hotel. But it had been sex, the first for a long time, and he was handsome and sweet and funny. She was sure he would never do anything to hurt her, and that night she slept better than she had since her arrival.

All mornings were the same here, all bright sunshine and mounting heat and cloudless sky. First she went to the pool. He shouldn't think she was running after him. But she had put on her new white swimming costume, the one that was no longer too tight, and after a while, with a towel tied round her, sarong-fashion, she went down to the beach.

For a long time she didn't see him. The American girl and the Caribbean man were serving the food and drink. Alison was so late getting there that all the recliners and hoods had gone. She was provided with a chair and an umbrella, inadequate protection against the sun. Then she saw him, leaning out of the pavilion to hand someone a towel. He waved to her and smiled. At once she was elated, and leaving her towel on the chair, she ran down the beach and plunged into the sea.

Because she wasn't being careful, because she had forgotten everything but him and the hope that he would come and sit with her and have a drink with her, she came out of the water without thinking of the mountain of water that pursued her, without any awareness that it was behind her. The great wave broke, felled her, and roared on, knocking out her breath, drenching her hair. She tried to get a purchase with her hands, to dig into the sand and pull herself up before the next breaker came. Her eyes and mouth and ears were full of salt water. She pushed her fingers into the wet, slippery sand and encountered something she thought at first was a shell. Clutching it, whatever it was, she managed to crawl out of the sea while the wave broke behind her and came rippling in, a harmless trickle.

By now she knew that what she held was no shell. Without looking at it, she thrust it into the top of her swimming costume, between her breasts. She dried herself, dried her eyes that stung with salt, felt a raging thirst from the brine she had swallowed. No one had come to her aid, no one had walked down to the water's edge to ask if she was all right. Not even the beach butler. But he was here now beside her, smiling, carrying her Diet Coke and packet of crisps as if she had ordered them.

"Ocean smack you down? Too bad. I don't think you lose no jewels?"

She shook her head, nearly said, "No, but I found some." But now wasn't the time, not until she had had a good look. She drank her Diet Coke, took the crisps upstairs with her. In her bathroom, under the cold tap, she washed her find. The sight came back to her of Agustin encircling his wrist with his fingers when he told

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her of the white bikini woman's loss. This was surely her bracelet or some other rich woman's bracelet.

It was a good two inches wide, gold-set with broad bands of diamonds. They flashed blindingly when the sun struck them. Alison examined its underside, found the assay mark, the proof the gold was 18 carat. The sea, the sand, the rocks, the salt, had damaged it not at all. It sparkled and gleamed as it must have done when first it lay on blue velvet in some Madison Avenue or Beverly Hills jeweller's shop.

She took a shower, washed her hair and blew it dry, put on a sundress. The bracelet lay on the coffee table in the living area of the suite, its diamonds blazing in the sun. She had better take it downstairs and hand it over to the management. The white bikini woman would be glad to have it back. No doubt, though, it was insured. Her husband would already have driven her to the city where the airport was (Ciudad something) and bought her another.

What was it worth? If those diamonds were real, an enormous sum. And surely no jeweller would set any but real diamonds in 18 carat gold. Alison was afraid to leave it in her suite. A safe was inside one of the cupboards. But suppose she put the bracelet into the safe and couldn't open it again? She put it into her white shoulder bag. The time was only just after three. She looked at the list of available videos, then, feeling reckless, at the room-service menu. Having the bracelet—though of course she meant to hand it in—made her feel differently about that credit card. She picked up the phone, ordered a piña colada, a half bottle of wine, seafood salad, a double burger and french fries, and a video of *Shine*.

Eating so much didn't keep her from a big dinner four hours later. She went to the most expensive of the hotel's three restaurants, drank more wine, ate smoked salmon, lobster thermidor, raspberry pavlova. She wrote her suite number on the bill and signed it without even looking at the amount. Under the tablecloth she opened her bag and looked at the gold and diamond bracelet. Taking it to the management now would be very awkward. They might be aware that she hadn't been to the beach since not long after lunchtime, they might want to know what she had been doing with the bracelet in the meantime. She made a decision. She wouldn't take it to the management, she would take it to Agustin.

The moon was bigger and brighter this evening, waxing from a sliver to a crescent. Not quite sober, for she had had a lot to drink, she walked down the winding path under the palms to the beach. This time he wasn't plying his metal detector but sitting on a pile of folded beach chairs, smoking a cigarette and staring at the sea. It was the first time she had seen the sea so calm, so flat and shining, without waves, without even the customary swell.

Agustin would know what to do. There might be a reward for the

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finder, almost sure to be. She would share it with him, she wouldn't mind that, so long as she had enough to pay for those extras. He turned round, smiled, extended one hand. She expected to be kissed, but he didn't kiss her, only patted the seat beside him.

She opened her bag, said, "Look."

His face seemed to close up, grow tight, grow instantly older. "Where you find this?"

"In the sea."

"You tell?"

"You mean, have I told anyone? No, I haven't. I wanted to show it to you and ask your advice."

"It is worth a lot. A lot. Look, this is gold. This is diamond. Worth maybe fifty thousand, hundred thousand dollar."

"Oh, no, Agustin!"

"Oh, yes, yes."

He began to laugh. He crowed with laughter. Then he took her in his arms, covered her face and neck with kisses. Things were quite different from the night before. In the shadows, under the pines, where the rocks were smooth and the sand soft, his love-making was slow and sweet. He held her close and kissed her gently, murmuring to her in his own language.

The sea made a soft lapping sound. A faint strain of music, the last of the evening, reached them from somewhere. He was telling her he loved her. *I love you, I love you.*

He spoke with the accents of California and she knew he had learnt it from films. *I love you.*

"Listen," he said. "Tomorrow we take the bus. We go to the city . . ." Ciudad Something was what he said but she didn't catch the name. ". . . We sell this jewel, I know where, and we are rich. We go to Mexico City, maybe Miami, maybe Rio. You like Rio?"

"I don't know. I've never been there."

"Nor me. But we go. Kiss me. I love you."

She kissed him. She put her clothes on, picked up her handbag. He watched her, said, "What are you doing?" and when she began to walk down the beach, called after her, "Where are you going?"

She stood at the water's edge. The sea was swelling into waves now, it hadn't stayed calm for long, its gleaming, ruffled surface black and silver. She opened her bag, took out the bracelet, and threw it as far as she could into the sea.

His yell was a thwarted child's. He plunged into the water. She turned and began to walk away up the beach towards the steps. When she was under the palm trees she turned to look back and saw him splashing wildly, on all fours, scrabbling in the sand, seeking what could never be found. As she entered the hotel the thought came to her that she had never told him her name and he had never asked. ●

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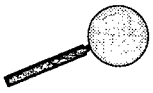

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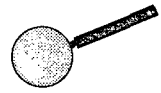

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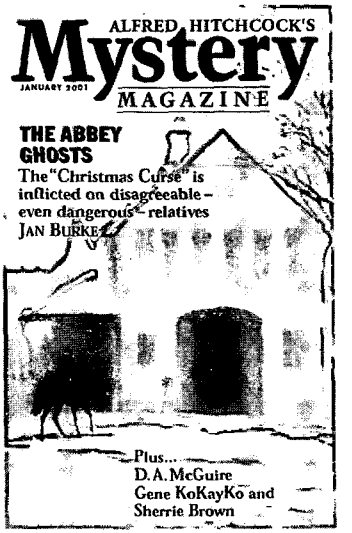

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